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343 INDUSTRIES

*Halo: Nightfall: 5 episode live-action series is streaming only, and will initially be available on a weekly basis, and then on demand. Xbox One or Windows 8.1 and broadband internet required; ISP fees apply. Halo 5: Guardians Beta: Game disc required. Limited-time beta starts December 27, 2014, and ends January 22, 2015. Must be 17+. Xbox One, broadband internet (ISP fees apply) and Xbox LIVE Gold membership (sold separately) required. Halo: Nightfall and Halo 5: Guardians Beta dates, content, and features subject to change. See www.xbox.com/halo



Microsoft

It's been 20 years since the release of the PlayStation in Japan and it's incredible to think of the changes the brand has brought to the videogame world in those two decades. The original PlayStation famously arrived as an outsider, a cast-off from a proposed partnership with Nintendo to move gaming onto disc media. The house of Mario backed away from the project and a new console was born.

My earliest memories of the PlayStation were playing *Tenchu*, which was like nothing else I had ever experienced. Coming from the Nintendo side of the last console war, my idea of games involved portly plumbers and green tunic-wearing elves. This brutal, punishing, tactical experience was a wake-up call. While looking back it wasn't necessarily the most mature game ever made, it was for me at that time a sign of things to come.

Skip ahead a few years and I'm playing *Shadow Of The Colossus*, which was another seminal moment. I was completely drawn in by the minimalist storytelling, the sparse environments and the ambling colossi. And where else could you find such an experience? What other company would have backed such a project and brought it to market? As proven again and again with games like *LittleBigPlanet*, *Heavy Rain* and *The Last Of Us*, Sony has continued to back ideas on the edges of mainstream thinking. That's what has always made these consoles exciting to me.

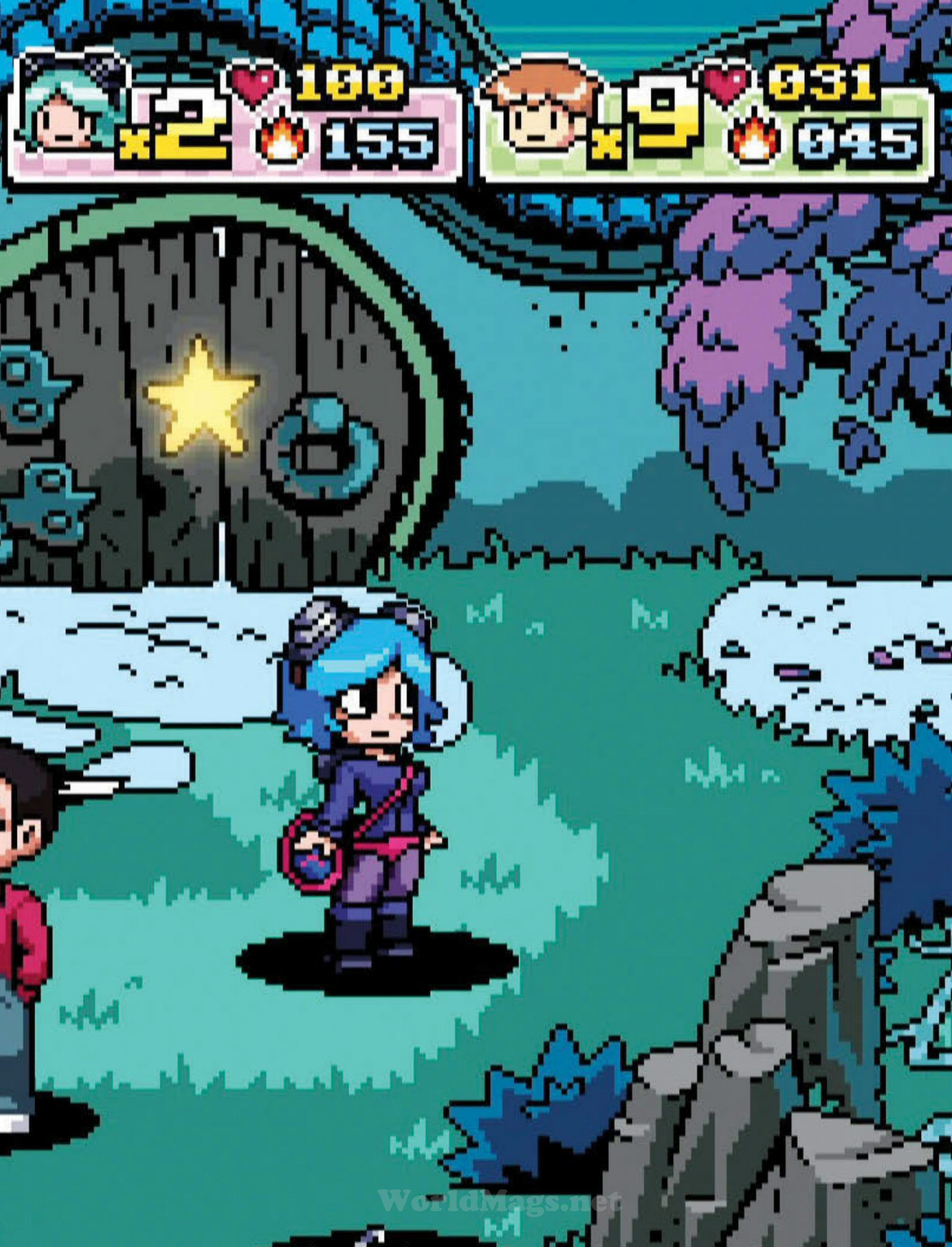
Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR





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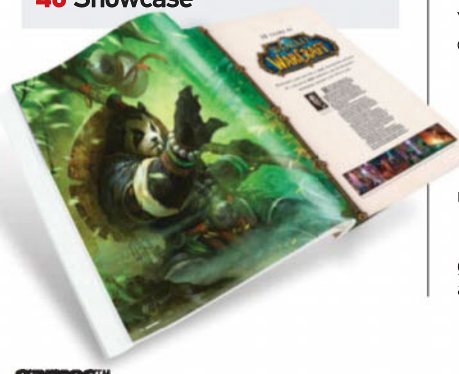
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The makers of Left 4 Dead lead the charge into
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Discuss

> A confluence of positive developments are in play as multiple platforms are primed for big years
>
> Edward Zhao, EEDAR

(THE INDUSTRY LOOKS FORWARD...)

Will 2015 redeem the games industry?

→ After a difficult 2014, there's cause for optimism as we head into the New Year. We ask developers and analysts what they're looking forward to in 2015

In a lot of ways, 2014 felt like a transitional year for games, and like any period of change, it wasn't without its pains. Even discounting the ugliness of the GamerGate movement and the accompanying furore, we saw more developer closures, as Nintendo's woes continued, Microsoft struggled to adapt to having conceded the lead in the new-gen console race, and Sony laboured to keep its online services stable, a noticeable problem for players of *Destiny* and first-party hopeful *DriveClub*. Elsewhere, the big publishers delayed many of their games into the New Year, and we saw strong signs of crowdfunding fatigue, with much-touted KickStarter projects failing to meet their goals.

With all that in mind, it's hard not to see 2015 as a potential Renaissance period for the industry, a new beginning of sorts that will hopefully see many of last year's problems all but eradicated, and a medium finding itself in rude health. Reading the future, of course, is a fool's errand, though it's possible to make a few educated guesses. Thus far, only a select few have been able to experience the pioneers of Virtual Reality gaming: Oculus Rift and Sony's Project Morpheus, but 2015 is the year that they will both see mainstream releases. Of course, there's already a VR product on the marketplace, in the form of Samsung Gear VR, but so far it's exclusively available only to owners of the company's Galaxy Note 4 handset, while Samsung is quite purposely marketing it towards "innovative consumers, specifically VR enthusiasts, developers, mobile experts and professionals, and early technology adopters," and not the gaming masses.



Above Michael Pachter isn't expecting VR to take off in 2015.

SIMON FLESSER, OF iOS darlings Simogo, has spent some time with the Gear VR and has mixed opinions about Virtual Reality gaming. "There's a cool demo where the menu is controlled by looking at stuff, and when you move your neck round it makes a click sound. So when you look at someone using it, they look like a cyborg! I

DATA STREAM → 16 PLANNED DLC PACKS FOR WITCHER 3 WILL ALL BE FREE SAYS CD PROJEKT

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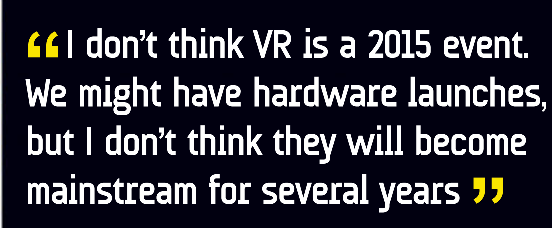
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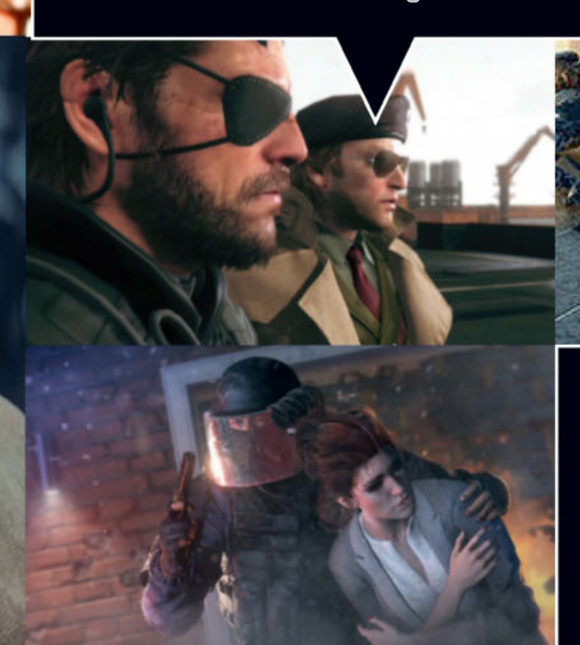
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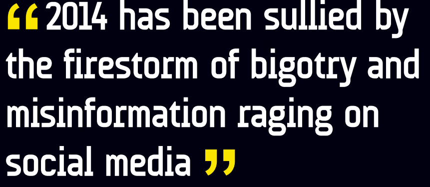
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think you could make something social built around that, but I don't know – I just feel a little uncomfortable personally with VR. It's so isolating, I don't like that the outside world is closed off."

Wedbush Morgan's Michael Pachter, meanwhile, believes that mass market uptake could be a little while off. "I don't think VR is a 2015 event," he says. "We might have hardware launches, but I don't think they will become mainstream for several years. [It's] sort of analogous to HDTV, which was invented in the late Nineties, but penetrated from 2003 – 2007."

Still on the hardware front, industry analysts are predicting a strong year for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. "The biggest driver of growth is likely to be the rapid penetration of next generation consoles," Pachter continues. "They are priced far lower than last generation at the same point, and both manufacturers appear intent upon defending their turf. The $349 Xbox One comes with *Assassin's Creed* and last year's game for free in the box, so we should see massive holiday sales. Sony is likely to counter with something, setting up a great 2015."

"We view 2015 as being a tremendous year for the industry," adds Edward Zhao, of EEDAR. "A confluence of positive developments are in play as multiple platforms are primed for big years. Firstly, the eighth-gen consoles have already sold exceptionally well, [even] though year over year software sales have been down. Historically, there's a transition period when one platform generation gives way to the next, leading to some softness in game sales as consumers adopt new hardware. We expect that by 2015, eighth-gen install bases will be large enough to support robust software sales, especially with so many high-quality titles releasing next year."

TALKING OF QUALITY titles, Zhao makes a very safe guess that *Call Of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed* "will perform admirably". EEDAR also has high expectations for *Halo 5: Guardians* and *Batman: Arkham Knight*, but its final selection may be more of a surprise. "*Mortal Kombat X* [is] tracking highly in terms of consumer aided awareness, and ➔



Above Dan Pearce fears competition with triple-A titles in 2015 may squeeze out some indie games.

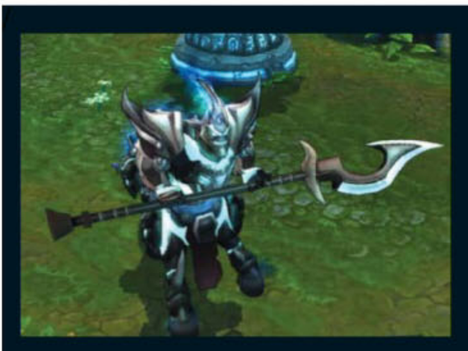
"If you have a great idea, remember that the platform owners want you just as much or more than you want them"

Brjann Sigurgeirsson, CEO, Image & Form

 MICROSOFT HAS ANNOUNCED 10 MILLION XBOX ONE CONSOLES HAVE BEEN SHIPPED WORLDWIDE 

TRENDS IN 2015

We asked all our interviewees what they thought would be the most significant industry trends of the coming year…



F2P AND MOBILE EXPAND

EDWARD ZHAO of EEDAR believes that the success of games like *League Of Legends* and *Clash Of Clans* are just the start of a period of advancement in the F2P and mobile markets. "These games rival traditional triple-A titles in terms of revenue generation," says Zhao, "and we only see continued growth as adoption increases throughout Asia. A lot of promising new games are entering the market, and developers are getting better at leveraging the F2P business model." We can expect to see more console publishers trying a similar approach, too.



THE 'INDIE GAP' NARROWS

BAFTA BREAKTHROUGH BRIT winner and *10 Second Ninja* developer Dan Pearce thinks that the delays to so many big 2014 titles may cause a few problems for smaller studios. "It might give us access to a larger install base on consoles, or those bigger titles might push smaller games to the back of digital storefronts," he says. "A lot of people are going to be reinventing what 'indie', 'triple-A' and everything in between is, and that'll define how the industry works for the next few years. It's an exciting and scary time to be an independent developer."



GAMES GET POLITICAL

JONATHAN BURROUGHS BELIEVES it's high time we saw more games pursuing a message, whether that be political, social or satirical. "Games like *Big Pharma* and *No Pineapple Left Behind* illustrate that games can be a really effective medium for articulating these kinds of ideas," he says. "In an election year in the UK, when liberalism and rational discourse is besieged by xenophobic right-wing lunatics, I'm hopeful we can see games being used as a tool for poking fun at those in power and illustrating alternative ways of organising our society."



EVERY PLATFORM HAS SOMETHING TO OFFER

DAN PEARCE BELIEVES "2015 will [finally] justify the flashy new consoles that people have been buying." Sam Barlow thinks that PC and the mobile space ("that other Wild West") will foster more experimental ideas: "It's where surprising things can exist. Games can come out of nowhere now. Games are turned around in a year. Stuff that comes out on a Tuesday and you've played it by Wednesday. It's amazing to drop into a game without much in the way of pre-conceptions."

is poised for success. Historically, the first triple-A core fighting game of the generation goes on to obtain significant market share."

As well as those likely hits, we've got plenty of games that were originally due at the tail end of this year to look forward to. Rhodri Broadbent, of indie developer Dakko Dakko, is intrigued by Ubisoft's *Rainbow Six: Siege*: "Of all the gritty shooters, this one surprised me and managed to grab my attention during E3 due to the strategy and team-play. It may not have the camp humour of *Ghost Squad*, instead continuing the genre's recent obsession with the Terribly Serious, but it looks like a lot of tense fun nonetheless." Alongside that, we can expect *Battlefield: Hardline* to benefit from an extra few months' worth of spit and polish, and on a more inventive first-person tip, there's Turtle Rock's *Evolve*.

And what of Nintendo? It's kicking off the year in fine style with *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker*, but *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* writer Sam Barlow – whose forthcoming game, *Her Story*, is due out next year – is looking forward to two more expansive adventures. "Wii U seems to have found its footing this year and the two biggest titles I'm most excited for are *Zelda* and *X*" he says. "The 3DS *Zelda* showed Nintendo finding some new ground to cover with the franchise and if they take that and run with it on Wii U it's going to be a genuine next step. *Xenoblade* remains one of the most beautiful, innovative JRPGS ever made and so they've earned the right with *X* to not have to innovate much more, just give us more of that experience, that rich generous exploration."



Inset *The Order: 1886* is one of Sony's leading exclusives going into 2015 on PS4.



DESTINY'S FIRST EXPANSION, THE DARK BELOW, LAUNCHES 9 DECEMBER ACROSS ALL PLATFORMS



Inset *Batman: Arkham Knight* is just one of a number of games pushed back into 2015.

> "Every new year starts with me believing that this is the one that will see videogames mature into a heterogeneous and inspiring medium"

Nadim Haddad, PastaGames

AS FAR AS broader industry trends go, many of our interviewees predict another strong year for independent developers. One such studio is Swedish dev Image & Form, which is releasing *SteamWorld Heist* in 2015. CEO Brjann Sigurgeirsson says he hopes smaller developers have a strong year, "not necessarily in terms of money, but in terms of invention, growth and balls. Fellas, if you have a great idea, remember that the platform owners want you just as much or more than you want them. Be fun! Be interesting! Be brave!"

Nadim Haddad, meanwhile, from *Pix The Cat* developer PastaGames, goes one further, predicting nothing short of a revolution. "Because I am a natural born optimist, every new year starts with me believing that this is the one that will see videogames mature into a heterogeneous and inspiring medium."

Haddad says that the current market conditions are the right ones to spark a creative new era for games, suggesting that the rift between conservative and progressive tendencies and the abundance of cheap, accessible development tools will entice fresh minds to games. "They are the ones that will bring videogames out of its egocentric circle," he adds. "They are the ones that will make games about themselves, [and] therefore about us. I hope 2015 will get us to understand that we are ripe to craft and to play games about everything, made by people from anywhere, for players everywhere."

Finally, Jonathan Burroughs, from Virginia developer Variable State, is excited about the wider games culture in 2015: "Although 2014 has been sullied by the firestorm of bigotry and misinformation raging on social media, it began hugely positively with Manveer Heir's powerful speech at GDC championing diversity and inclusivity in games. One year on I anticipate we'll start to see works emerging which have been directly influenced by his words."

In lots of ways, it's been a rough 12 months for the industry, but it's clear that the current crop of games developers and analysts believes there's cause for great optimism as we head into 2015. Gaming's best year ever? It's a little too early to call, but already it feels like everyone's ready for a fresh start.



Above Brjann Sigurgeirsson is looking forward to a good year for small dev teams.

Inset iOS title *Spacepants* was made by 12-year-old Sam Smith. Jonathan Burroughs anticipates more games produced by youngsters like Smith "now that programming is on the National Curriculum in the UK."



Inset Brjann Sigurgeirsson is hopeful about Microsoft keeping Minecraft multi-platorm: "Microsoft knows better than that"

SONY EXCLUSIVE BLOODBORNE HAS BEEN PUSHED BACK TO 28 MARCH 2015 IN THE UK



(WATCH, LISTEN AND LEARN)

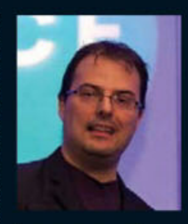
The future of Watch Dogs

Creating new gaming IP is a risky businesses but, with just one game to beat, surely creating a sequel to a successful debut should be easy. It shouldn't, says Watch Dogs' creative director Jonathan Morin

What was the point of Ubisoft's cyber-noir epic *Watch Dogs*? Why did creative director Jonathan Morin and his team spend five years slaving away on this open world action-adventure, capturing images of Chicago, working on eight-player co-op and creating accomplished hacker Aiden Pearce? If it was to achieve stunning success as a game then its glowing reviews (including a 9/10 by this very magazine), 8 million sales and a role in helping the French publisher rake in a staggering £387 million in its first quarter results for 2014 has been vindication of all of the team's hard work.

But if its main purpose was to establish a brand and a "promise" for the future – "The challenge when we made the first game was to create something that would make people dream about something else", says Morin – then it has over-achieved. For there is no doubting the high expectation now on the development team to deliver a very special sequel, and that will require Morin and his team to be at the top of their game.

"When you start a new project [and new IP], it's a blank page and everything you do is what you want to do," he says. "With a sequel, there is more pressure to push a brand forward and we now have to appeal to fans in a new way." In order to do this, Morin insists *Watch Dogs* will continue to take risks. "You have to carry on taking risks", he asserts. "I will not do this job if there is no risk in it, that would just be boring. You shouldn't prevent yourself from trying something just because it's hard and the solution is not apparent."



Above Jonathan Morin worked tirelessly on the release of *Watch Dogs* earlier this year.



Inset Gamers loved the missions and the hacking aspects of the game with single-player going down as well as multiplayer.

Morin already has some plans. Although he says it is too early to go into intricate detail about them, he wants players to continue creating their own stories using features like the Profiler. He also wants his team to refrain from filling in too many narrative gaps. "We want to allow them to play with a very different state of mind, not wrap up concepts for them." He talks about expanding on the alternate realities, "players loved the idea of other players who create an alternate reality in their games and knowing that now opens up a lot of new possibilities of what online can do." More than that, he wants to reassess everything about *Watch Dogs*, including the ideas that were originally dismissed, and reconsider them again. Everything is back on the table.



TELLTALE'S GAME OF THRONES SERIES WILL BE SIX EPISODES AND STARTS WITH IRON FROM ICE NEXT YEAR



Inset The game took more than five years to make but even so, Morin admits to flaws and insists the franchise will become even stronger.

> "I will not do this job if there is no risk in it, that would just be boring"

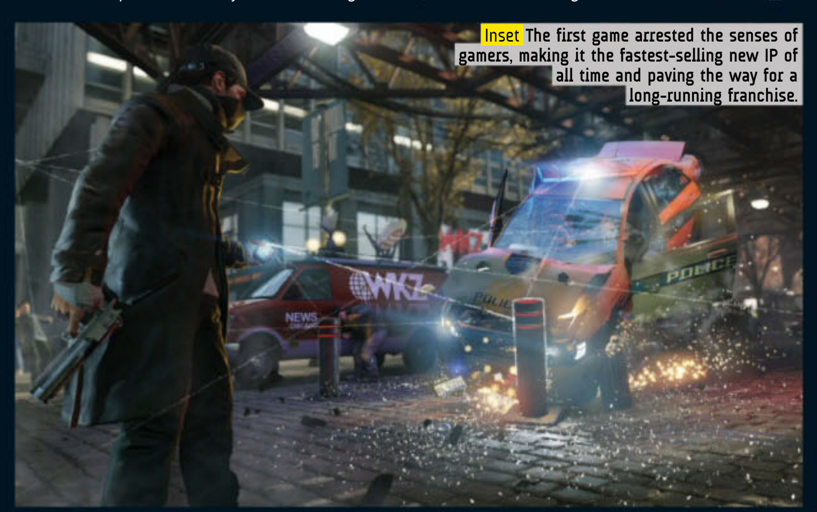
It is all part of a strategy to help *Watch Dogs* sit alongside Ubisoft's other classics such as *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry*, while steering clear of the sequel becoming an industry calamity of *Devil May Cry 2* and *Duke Nukem Forever* proportions. By moving his team away from a mindset of simply creating more of the same – a temptation when the original was so well received – Morin says the game will be hugely challenging not only for gamers but for his own development team.

"We have to give them something hard to do", he says. "If we don't, they could fade out, which means you don't benefit from their knowledge or they will leave. Our team is really assimilated with the challenge we have and who knows where it will lead us next."

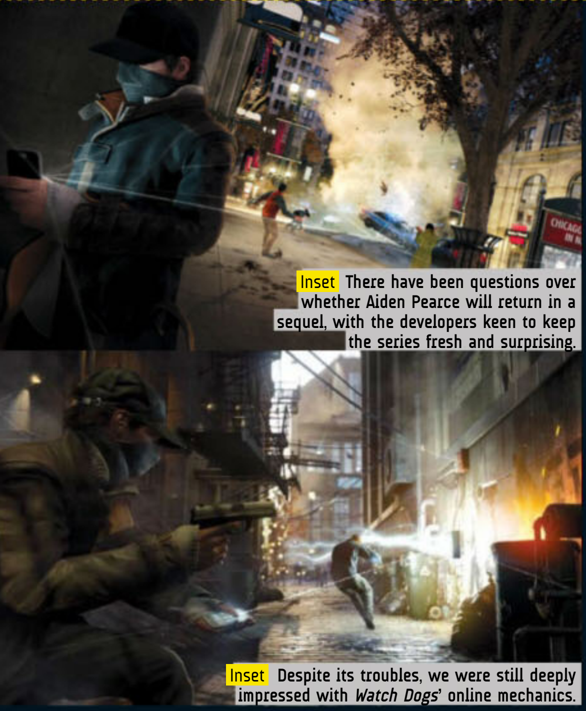
This approach is by no means unusual but neither is it widespread in the industry. Successful sequel makers such as Naughty Dog understand that each follow-up has to be built upon and improved. They avoid looking at healthy sales as a barometer for a "business as usual" approach and they take feedback and criticism on board. For successful sequel creators, the process is not just about fixing flaws but seeing the debut game with a fresh pair of eyes.

"I don't think *Watch Dogs* is perfect in any way and there's a lot of room for improvement", Morin readily admits. "But you don't always see this when you ship a game. We deliver what we believe the brand should be at the time. But afterward, when you cool down after five and a half years [of development] and take your vacations and people play the game, certain elements become clear. They let you continue to bring what you envision to the next level with the fans included this time, which is where I think it really gets interesting."

To identify how much work really needs to be done, Morin continues to visit forums and read reviews as well as talk to fans in person. "I have four kids at school and their friends tell us what they like and don't like about the game", he says. And he is relishing it. "The new pressure is almost like a privilege", he says. "If you are making a game with pressure, then you're making a game people care about. And people care about *Watch Dogs*."



Inset The first game arrested the senses of gamers, making it the fastest-selling new IP of all time and paving the way for a long-running franchise.



Inset There have been questions over whether Aiden Pearce will return in a sequel, with the developers keen to keep the series fresh and surprising.

Inset Despite its troubles, we were still deeply impressed with *Watch Dogs*' online mechanics.

WHEN DEVELOPERS GET IT RIGHT

We look at five sequels that were better than the original



HALF-LIFE 2

With stylish storytelling, expansive environments and an unbelievably realistic feel, Valve crafted an incredible sequel that freshened up an already classic debut.



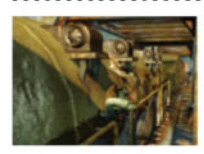
ASSASSIN'S CREED 2

The endless repetition of the first game led to a flawed original. But Ubisoft showed it can listen, resulting in a rich, open world with fantastic side quests.



SUPER MARIO BROS

Created in 1985 for the NES following the original arcade 1983 *Mario Bros*, this game has often been cited as a highly influential game in how it transformed the industry.



UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES

This sequel improved hit detection, boosted the narrative and wrapped it all in a gorgeous cinematic sheen with an abundance of heart-thumping set pieces.



STREET FIGHTER II

Without *SFII*, we wonder where the genre would be today. By allowing players to choose characters, each of whom had their moves and attacks, it was revolutionary.



THE HALO 5: GUARDIANS BETA WILL RUN AT 720P AND 60FPS ACCORDING TO 343 INDUSTRIES



(SONY'S FUTURE DREAM)

"VR doesn't need to be realistic"

SCE London Studio director Dave Ranyard has overseen the development of SingStar and Wonderbook but with half of his staff working on Project Morpheus, he is currently eyeing greater potential.

When did your studio become involved with Project Morpheus?
If you look at our history, we've done a lot of augmented reality going right back to *EyeToy: Play*, which came out 11 years ago, so we've actually been looking at camera tech for around 12 years. But I'd say we've probably known about Sony's plan for virtual reality and been interested in it for a couple of years. There was an internal memo about Sony's push and strategy around VR and we naturally wanted to get involved.

Was Sony working on Morpheus before Oculus started its Kickstarter project?
Honestly, I can't remember. From my perspective, I think the stars were aligned in terms of availability of technology for this kind of product or prototype. I suspect there are other people who have yet to show their hand.

How many people do you have working on VR?
The studio as a whole employs around 110 people and about half are working on the Morpheus prototype. Part of that is an art team that fluctuates – if we want to make something to take to a videogame show, then we ramp up the art team accordingly. But it's around half.

Why is Project Morpheus important to you?
I believe it will be a disruptive technology and its effect will eventually be similar to the arrival of sound in film. The ingredients are there.

So far, we've seen two different kinds of games from SCE London Studios: *The Deep* and *Street Luge*. Is there a lot of experimentation going on?
VR is a new world to explore and we're finding that we're coming up with some ideas that don't work and then devising others that do; that kind of experience is quite unique for me. Over the past 18 months we've also seen interest within the studio grow and people are questioning the kind of concepts we can do with it.

Are there any concepts that have worked really well?
Well, people looked at *Street Luge* on paper and they were unsure it would work, but actually, it's had a really good response. The fact it has pure Morpheus control is so engaging. But we're experimenting. Early doors, we thought it would be cool if you rode on animals; riding a horse or whatever. We tried it but the motion thing didn't really work.

VR is not a new tech as such and there have been many failures. Why could it succeed now?
It's always hard to predict the future, but the ingredients are there now. We have advanced smartphone screen technology and there's great optic and head-tracking technology. The speed of the processes is quick enough to fool the human brain. The sum of the parts make a great VR experience.

Does it make a difference that graphics are so much better now?
Graphics are important but I personally believe there will be a lot of scope for non-realistic looking experiences as well. It's an interesting thing, but you might be watching a sci-fi movie that successfully suspends disbelief and then watch a real-world movie that doesn't. Some of my favourite movies are by Tim Burton and they suck you into them but they don't look real. I personally



Above Ranyard believes VR could be as impactful as the advent of sound in film.

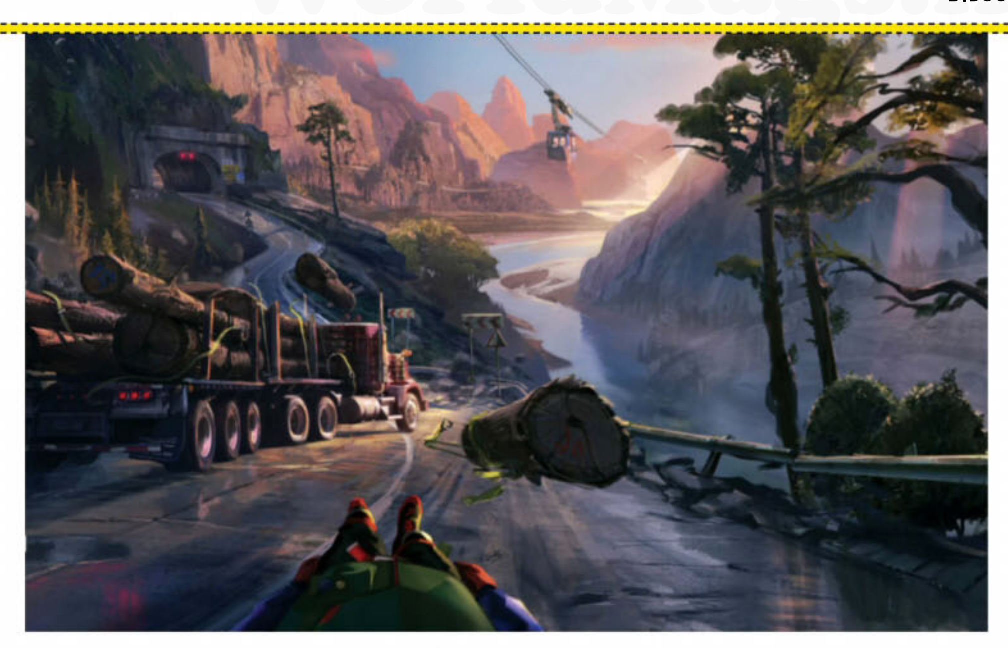




Right As well as working on Project Morpheus, SCE London Studio has developed *SingStar*, *EyeToy: Play* and *Wonderbook*, with a history dating back as far as 1993.



AVALANCHE HAS ASSURED FANS NO MICROTRANSACTIONS WILL APPEAR IN JUST CAUSE 3



believe it will be the same for virtual-reality experiences. It doesn't have to look real to be a great virtual-reality experience.

But what about experiences that are real – could they prove too much for gamers?
I think there are some great experiences to be had and I think it will be more visceral for people. The German ratings body rated our demo of *The Deep* as 15 for the headset but only 12 on screen, so they believed gamers would have a greater emotional reaction to what they were seeing in the headset. But I go to theme parks and I like the thrill rides. We kind of want to know there is a safety net but we also want to take that step into make-believe and enjoy the experience of it.

How far could those experiences go?
We have done some prototyping of scary stuff. We have allowed players to control and orchestrate what is happening to somebody else using a tablet or smartphone and I think that is a lot of fun. It will allow for repeatable experiences because that sort of thing will be fun every time.



One of the problems that we've found with VR has been the resolution of the screens – you can feel as if you are looking at a television much too close at times…
I am sure there is a great technical answer for the resolution but I'm not the person to give it. The headsets are still prototypes and I believe we will get to a point where you can really fool the brain that you are in a different place. Right now we are continuing with the team we have got on it, trying out new experiences, trying to solve some of the challenges and, you know, enjoy working on it, really. It has been great for the studio to be able to work on such a leading-edge technology and also having the opportunity to create some things and put them out for people to try and get feedback and learn about them.

Above Best played lying down, *Street Luge* puts you on a virtual board and lets you tilt your head from side to side to move as you hurtle down a road, avoiding traffic.

Due date

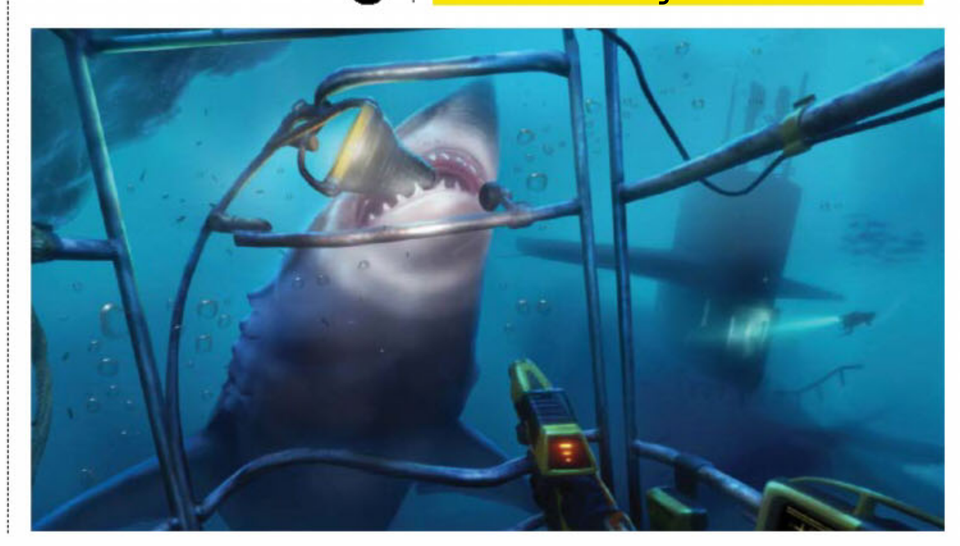
When exactly will the VR revolution begin?

Although third-party developers are already able to get involved in creating games for Project Morpheus, an announcement date for its release has yet to be confirmed. "I can't say how long off it is but I do know it is great fun working on this prototype", says SCE London Studio's studio director Dave Ranyard.

However, by the time it is released, Ranyard expects Morpheus' game line-up to be very strong. Although there is no news on whether *The Deep* or *Street Luge* would be released, Ranyard says improvements are being made every day.

"Even now, compared to what we were doing six or nine months ago, I think we have made huge leaps and bounds in what we know. For us it's about understanding cool ways to interact in virtual reality and getting mechanics that work. We've always been interested in creating new experiences."

> "The German ratings body rated our demo of The Deep as 15 for the headset but only 12 on screen"



→ ANOTHER FALLOUT 4 HOAX WAS DISCOVERED WITH A SHADOW OF BOSTON TRADEMARK DEBUNKED



(OPINION)

How Is Controversy Good For Gaming?

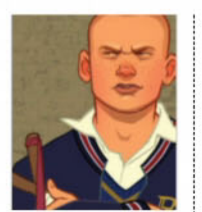
→ Every entertainment format has its growing pains. Videogames have it hard right now, being the newest and most interactive form of mass entertainment out there. But that's not necessarily a bad thing; controversy can open the door to a conversation about how games can do better…



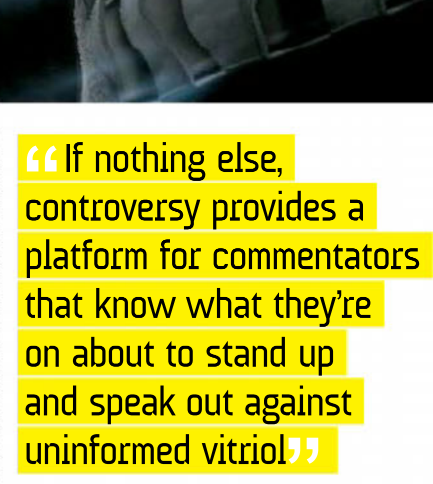
It seems that the gaming industry simply can't help but get itself into mainstream controversies. Whether it's through its depiction of sex or violence, a new 'gaming nasty' is never too far away. Recently, the first-person perspective for *GTA V* garnered a lot of scrutiny as it seemed to add a new level of realism to its graphic content. Indie shooter *Hatred* was widely criticised by gaming media for its blood lust and wanton carnage, seemingly courting the kind of controversy most of us would think was best to avoid. But for the most part we know that these games don't influence the public in the way some would have you believe. So why does gaming still have such a bad reputation among non-gaming communities, and what can be done to prevent that image being propagated? Moreover, is pushing the edges of what is acceptable actually an important part of the industry maturing?

FIRSTLY, WE BELIEVE responsible reporting is a must: games representatives are now given more of a platform to defend our pastime from criticism whenever we're being attacked – that's only fair, after all – and with university professors, MPs and respected journalists coming out in defence of games, it's safe to say the status quo is shifting. While there *are* scientifically backed studies that indicate games can desensitise people to violence (along with films, TV and literature), there's a higher concentration of studies regarding the *positive* effects of gaming: something you're not likely to see outside of culture-specific media.

The progress made by creative visionaries in our field – Ken Levine, Peter Molyneux, the BioWare doctors, the Housers and many, *many* others – are often undercut by a very public preconception that 'violent games are evil': an opinion put forth in the Nineties that mainstream media has done little to change. Yet, since then, studies have proven that the Wii, PlayStation Move and Kinect have helped growing children improve cognitive motor skills through movement and play. The infamous UK study known colloquially as the 'Olsen Report' has stated that even the most nefarious series in games controversy (*Grand Theft Auto*) allows players an outlet for their anger, as well as citing that playing games provides a platform for people to



Below Drug use, racism, drink driving, violence, abhorrent language and complete criminal fantasy… these are just some of the elements that make *GTA* such a *fun* game.

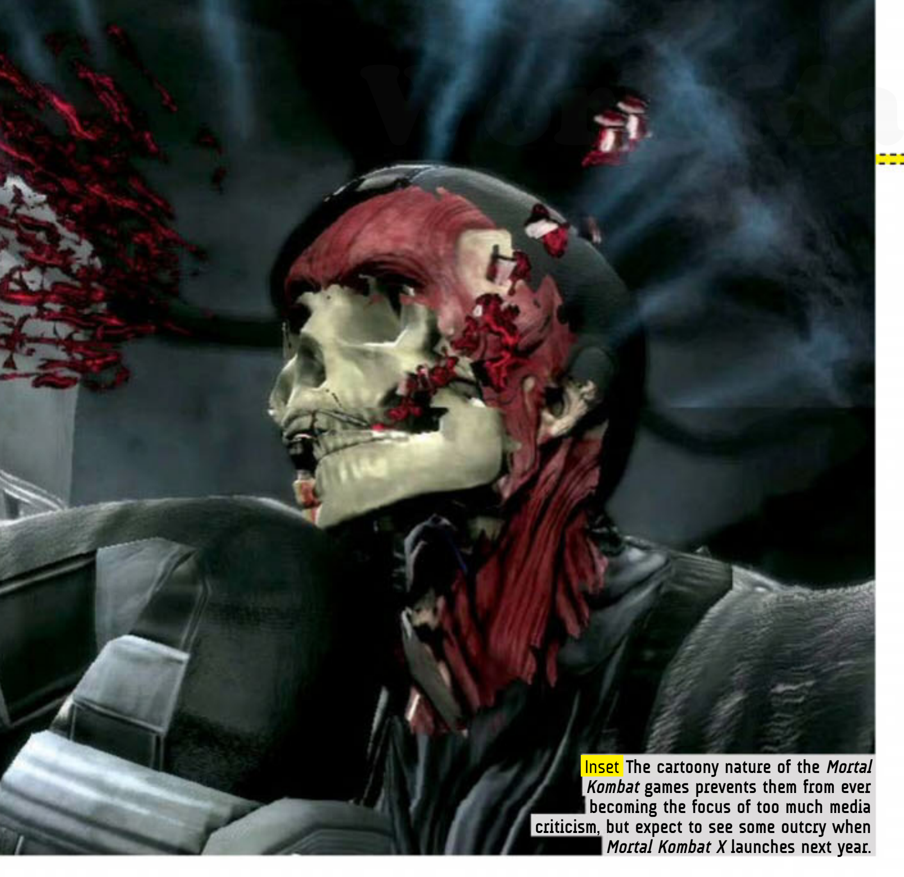


"If nothing else, controversy provides a platform for commentators that know what they're on about to stand up and speak out against uninformed vitriol"





A FORMER SONY EMPLOYEE HAS LEFT HIS NAME IN THE CODE OF EVERY PS4 HDD FOR A LASTING LEGACY



Inset The cartoony nature of the *Mortal Kombat* games prevents them from ever becoming the focus of too much media criticism, but expect to see some outcry when *Mortal Kombat X* launches next year.

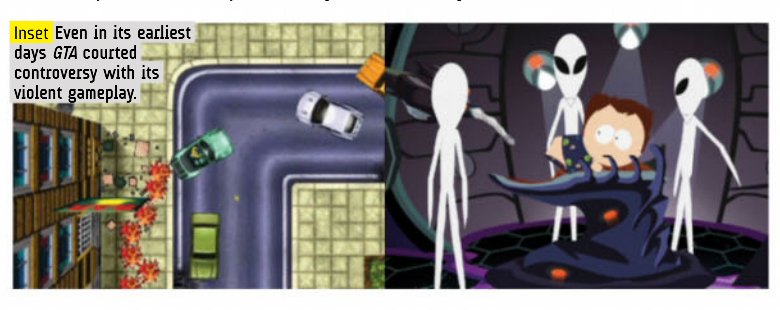
talk to others – discussing stratagems and theories that promote cognitive growth in cerebral zones that traditional education isn't as good at reaching.

Speaking from experience, we've learnt a whole remit of random miscellany from videogames that we probably wouldn't care about otherwise. JRPGs have versed us well in traditional Japanese mythology, *Assassin's Creed* has taught us about real history, RTS games have taught us resource and time management – even *The Sims* has lessons to impart about design and special awareness. Even first-person shooters – the games traditionally in the sights of the anti-gaming crowd (no pun intended) – are educational: a 2014 study from the University of Buffalo concluded that in-game violence makes gamers acutely aware of the moral codes they have violated in real life, creating a deeper sense of empathy and sensitivity towards their actions in reality…

It's a drum that's been beaten many times before, but we believe controversies are healthy for this industry – if nothing else, the wild accusations and criticisms flung at gamers and gaming provide a fantastic platform for commentators that know what they're on about to stand up and speak out against uninformed vitriol that's so easily printed or typed for clicks and headlines. We actively welcome games like the recently controversial *Hatred*, because even if they damage perceptions of gaming in the short-term, it at least creates room for a conversation that needs to happen – a conversation about how games can help, about how games can teach.



Above In reports of the Columbine School incident, games (*Doom* specifically) were cited as potential motivation; other media was overlooked.



Inset Even in its earliest days *GTA* courted controversy with its violent gameplay.

THE LEAST CONTROVERSIAL CONTROVERSIES

Gaming has had its fair share of outrages in its short life. Here are our favourite non-starters from throughout the years…

PORTAL 2 & ADOPTION



After the game's release in 2011, CBS News deemed Valve's puzzler offensive to adopted children on the account of one throwaway line said by antagonist Wheatley to protagonist Chell in which he calls her, fairly childishly, "Fatty fatty no-parents". There was one formal complaint.

THE SIMS 2 & NUDITY



Maxis' 2004 follow-up to its critically-acclaimed 'life simulator' found players removing the censorship blur that covered naked Sims after they got out of the shower. This had the potential to be serious, until you realise the naked Sims are actually completely featureless, like mannequins.

MASS EFFECT & SODOMY



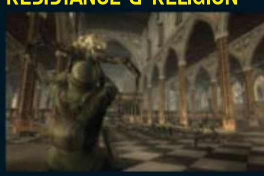
An American evangelist stated the game promoted "rape and sodomy" – his outcry eventually landing *Mass Effect* on Fox News in the US, where they bemoaned the game for its "full graphic sex". Of course, the game doesn't even touch on such themes: the most titillating scene featuring a low-resolution glimpse of partial alien nudity.

POKÉMON & PETA



Not content with pointing out how evil Mario is for wearing Tanooki fur (or something) PETA turned its attention to *Pokémon*, creating its own flash-based game *Pokémon: Black And Blue* – infringing on a ton of copyrights and achieving nothing other than making people want to play the original games even more.

RESISTANCE & RELIGION



Resistance: Fall Of Man used Manchester Cathedral for one of its levels, spurring the Church of England to attempt to make the publisher apologise, and donate to/ promote Manchester groups trying to quash gun crime in the city. Sony's rebuttal: the game was not meant to offend, after all 'it's not based in reality'.



LIMOUSINE SPINNING GAME ROUNDABOUT HAS BEEN CONFIRMED FOR PS4 AND PS VITA IN EARLY 2015



Censors and sensibility

→ *Manhunt*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Hitman*, *Doom*. All of those games carry an uneasy legacy, each picked up by mainstream media and used to brand gamers with the words 'violent', 'irresponsible', etc. Enter *Hatred* – a game about a trenchcoat-clad loner embarking on a 'crusade of genocide'. "It's time for me to kill," he tells the player after arming himself to the teeth and stepping into the street, "and it's time for me to die". We asked what you thought…

■ It might not be a game I'd play, but I do believe in choice. The problem will come when parents once again choose to ignore what I'm sure would be an "18" rating because "it's a game" and 12-13 year olds or younger will be playing it. I used to work in a Game store and got so fed up with parents buying their 8-year-old *GTA* and the like despite my pointing out that the game was 18 rated and not suitable, "Oh it's fine, it's only a game."
Adrian Fowler, Facebook

■ I must confess, I am intrigued. It's not as if mindless killing has never happened in a game. It feels like a modern day *Gauntlet*, but with guns and slightly more violent.
@DerekWheatley, Twitter

■ I think it's morally repugnant. I am left wondering if that's a point it is (ham-fistedly) trying to make – but it's OK that it exists. It looks like a flop courting controversy column inches. It's trying too hard to be the next *Manhunt*.
@sycopat, Twitter

■ It's capitalizing on the xXGrImDaRk69Xx idea that if something is offensive it's edgy and holds more integrity than something that considers the impact actions have on people, while completely forgetting that if you're going to try to be offensive, it's generally better to have a reason for it otherwise you're just falling back on lazy shock value.
Alfie Stegosaurus, Facebook

■ Considering the fact that you have titles like *Shadow Of The Colossus*, *The Stanley Parable* and *Gone Home* that are trying hard to lift gaming into valid forms of expression in ways that no other type of media can match, games like *Hatred* destroy all that and bring gaming crashing back down into the realms of the childish adolescent time-wasting that it began as.
Andy O'Flaherty, Facebook

■ If *Purge Anarchy* can make it to cinemas, *Hatred* can make it to consoles. Watching a movie isn't different than controlling a game.
@5tubborn, Twitter

■ This horrible and haunting trailer is repellent, but also makes me feel itchy about the many murders I've committed in games.
@TQuillfeldt, Twitter



Five Things About
Just Cause 3

Long-rumoured to be in development, Avalanche has finally started revealing details of its greatly-anticipated, chaotic sandbox sequel. *Just Cause 2* earned itself a cult following as players began to embrace its emergent gameplay potential, and what's been revealed so far of *Just Cause 3* promises a much wider appreciation of those efforts…

1 It's a homecoming…

Rico Rodriguez is heading home. After many years out in the field toppling dictatorships around the world with his unique brand of opposition via destruction and slicked-back hair, Rico returns to the Mediterranean and his homestead of Medici. General Di Ravello has taken control of the country and so Rico gets the chance to show off his insurgency skills to the home crowd. The game is set a number of years after the events of *Just Cause 2* so expect to see Rico a little more aged and ragged than in the past. Hopefully the story will be a little fuller this time around too.

2 New tech to play with…

The grappling hook and ever-present parachute are what made *Just Cause* such an instantly fun game to play, so it's good to hear those will both be available to you from the start. What is new however is a wingsuit that allows you to travel around Medici at incredible speeds and traverse much greater distances when in free fall. It should also save you a lot of time travelling around the island as doing it by parachute could become a bit of a drag. Combined with the ability to latch onto passing aircraft, cars and enemies the wingsuit should be a potent new tool in your arsenal.

3 Verticality goes both ways…

Famed for its skydiving, Avalanche is obviously making sure that *Just Cause 3* delivers the kind of topography you'll enjoy scaling and plummeting towards, but having lots of verticality doesn't just mean reaching into the skies. Expect to do a little spelunking in this game as subterranean caverns have been added for the first time, meaning you could be dropping as far beneath the ground as you do towards it from the sky. We imagine this will add a lot more options to how you approach enemy bases to cause even more mayhem than usual. Whether or not you can blow up a mountain remains to be seen.

4 Tighter all around…

If we had one major complaint about the *Just Cause* games so far (other than the voice acting) it would be that the controls have tended to be a little floaty and loose. Shooting wasn't quite as satisfying as it could be and driving really left a lot to be desired. That's being addressed according to Avalanche. The team is working to make the moment-to-moment gameplay and control much tighter and much more satisfying. As an example of how this is being done, Avalanche has hired a number of former *Burnout* team members to work on the car handling and driving mechanics. We can't think of a better dev team to tap for this kind of gameplay.

5 No effect on *Mad Max*…

While there's been no official word on the progress of Avalanche's *Mad Max* game with Warner Bros, we have no concern over its future. For a start, Avalanche now has a staff of around 250 people split between its home studio in Stockholm and a newer studio in New York opened in 2011, after the release of *Just Cause 2*. Between those two teams we doubt there will be too much trouble dividing up staff to make sure the open-world chaos of a post-apocalyptic Australia doesn't interfere or get delayed by the open-world chaos of a pre-apocalyptic Mediterranean island.

KONGETSU

GOTTA COLLECT 'EM ALL?



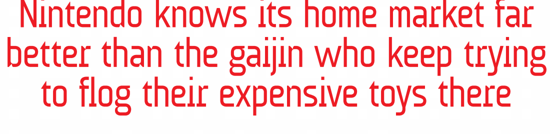
Amiibo: Can Nintendo secure a home turf lead?



It might surprise you to learn that the original *Skylanders* has only been out for a little over a year in Japan. It might surprise you *more* to learn that the game didn't even manage to make it onto either the Media Create or Famitsu sales charts on release, despite even getting a region-exclusive Wii U port – somewhat odd for a franchise worth billions of dollars, right? You'd think that this format would be perfectly suited for a country where both figurines and videogames are big business, but even *Disney Infinity* and its cast of universally-loved stars similarly failed to make a dent in the Japanese market.

Nintendo's first foray into NFC is a decent indicator of why these Western pioneers of toy-game tech never got off the ground. For *Pokémon Scramble U*, Nintendo released a line of compatible toys based on those depicted by the game – small, stylised and sold in blind boxes, these were clearly geared towards the huge gachapon market. Space is at a premium in many Japanese homes, so we're not actually all that surprised that tiny, angular versions of popular *Pokémon* characters outperformed the chunkier toys of *Skylanders* and *Infinity*. That, and there's the guilty pleasure of the blind box grind to try to finish a collection against your wallet's better judgement, as *Shenmue* fans will know all too well. Maybe just *one* more…

With little to no competition in the higher end of this NFC gaming scene in Japan, then, Nintendo is surely poised to dominate the Japanese corner of this sub-market with its Amiibo line of figures. These aren't like the gaudy creatures of *Skylanders* or the oddly stylised *Infinity* lines – they're just straight-up authentic replicas of some of gaming's biggest and brightest stars. That alone would probably secure success, but Nintendo's decision to maximise on the shelving real estate these cuties take up is the real clincher. While each figure can only store one game's data at a time, the line will be compatible across a number of different franchises and perhaps more importantly, it doesn't even require a 'portal' device to interface with software as the Wii U Gamepad handles all of that technical wizardry. Smart play, and proof that Nintendo knows its home market far better than the gaijin who keep trying to flog their expensive (and often ugly) toys there.



> Nintendo knows its home market far better than the gaijin who keep trying to flog their expensive toys there

I've no doubt that Nintendo will break the back of NFC gaming in Japan, but it'll be interesting to see how Amiibos perform in the West – popular as the characters may be, they're up against stiff competition from two of the biggest names in modern entertainment with established brands. Still, loyalty among Nintendo fans is staggering. I know people who will buy one of each figure for every supported game and once it gets off the blocks with the format, surely Nintendo will do The Most Obvious Thing Ever and apply the same tech to a full line of hundreds of unique *Pokémon* toys? I've never simultaneously craved and feared something so much in my entire life.

Luke Albiges is Deputy Editor of **Play** magazine and unashamed of his Skylanders collection. A proper Pokémon NFC toy line would be super effective against him.



● The original *Youkai Watch* – a Level-5 RPG for 3DS based around catching and battling ghosts that blends *Pokémon*, Ghibli and gashapon culture – was first released the same week *Skylanders* failed to chart, debuting at number two just behind *Pikmin 3*. Closer to the original *Pokémon* formula than any of this crazy techno-toy nonsense, its game, manga, anime and merchandise all work in cross-media harmony.



ROOM WITH A VIEW

With The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck



Achieving the Impossible

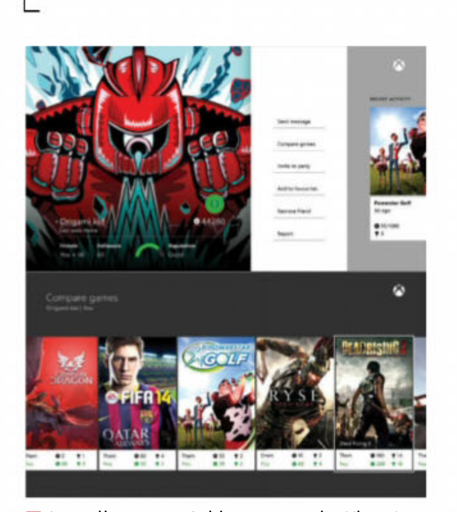


So here's a question – does anyone really, actually care about achievements anymore? Maybe once they were a half-decent idea (I'm not going to go more than half though), but now they just feel like a hangover [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: YOU'VE BEEN DRINKING]. I don't know many developers who don't passionately hate them, I'd put money on the number of gamers who hate them far outnumbering those who don't – and then there's the whole other third mass of gamers who just don't care if they are there or not… [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: THE SILENT MAJORITY] Essentially, for the most part, achievements only exist because developers are forced to include them.

They are largely redundant when a game is well designed – because a well-designed game has a system for rewarding the player for engaging with the game [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: YOU DID WHAT YOU WERE TOLD] – so adding in additional and usually spurious rewards on top of this is basically pointless. It's not like *Borderlands*' Badass ranks, which are actually tied to play and feed back into the system – that's smart design. The only function of achievements are to try and engineer a sense of social competitiveness in the public spaces of online stores, a bit like letting shoppers at Tesco's wear a special hat shaped like broccoli as a reward for vegetable purchases [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: NICE HAT, SIR], in an effort to make other shoppers also buy broccoli [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: OUTVEGGING THE COMPETITION]. Whether the broccoli is tasty or not becomes an irrelevance. And that's the big issue, really.

It's a bit like those banner ads popping up in the last two minutes of a TV show, telling you what's on next [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: THAT'S THAT RUINED FOR YOU, THEN]. These are placed by people who are riddled with contempt and hate for humanity and television. On what planet would you trash the final moments of an engaging show [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: WERE YOU ENJOYING THAT?] with a pop-up, if you had even the smallest, vaguest sense that people might actually be immersed in it, enjoying the moment, not wanting to have that shat on by some marketing exec [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: GETTING DOWN WITH THE BROWN] with no interest in or connection to either product or consumer.

> The only function of achievements are to try and engineer a sense of social competitiveness in the public spaces of online stores

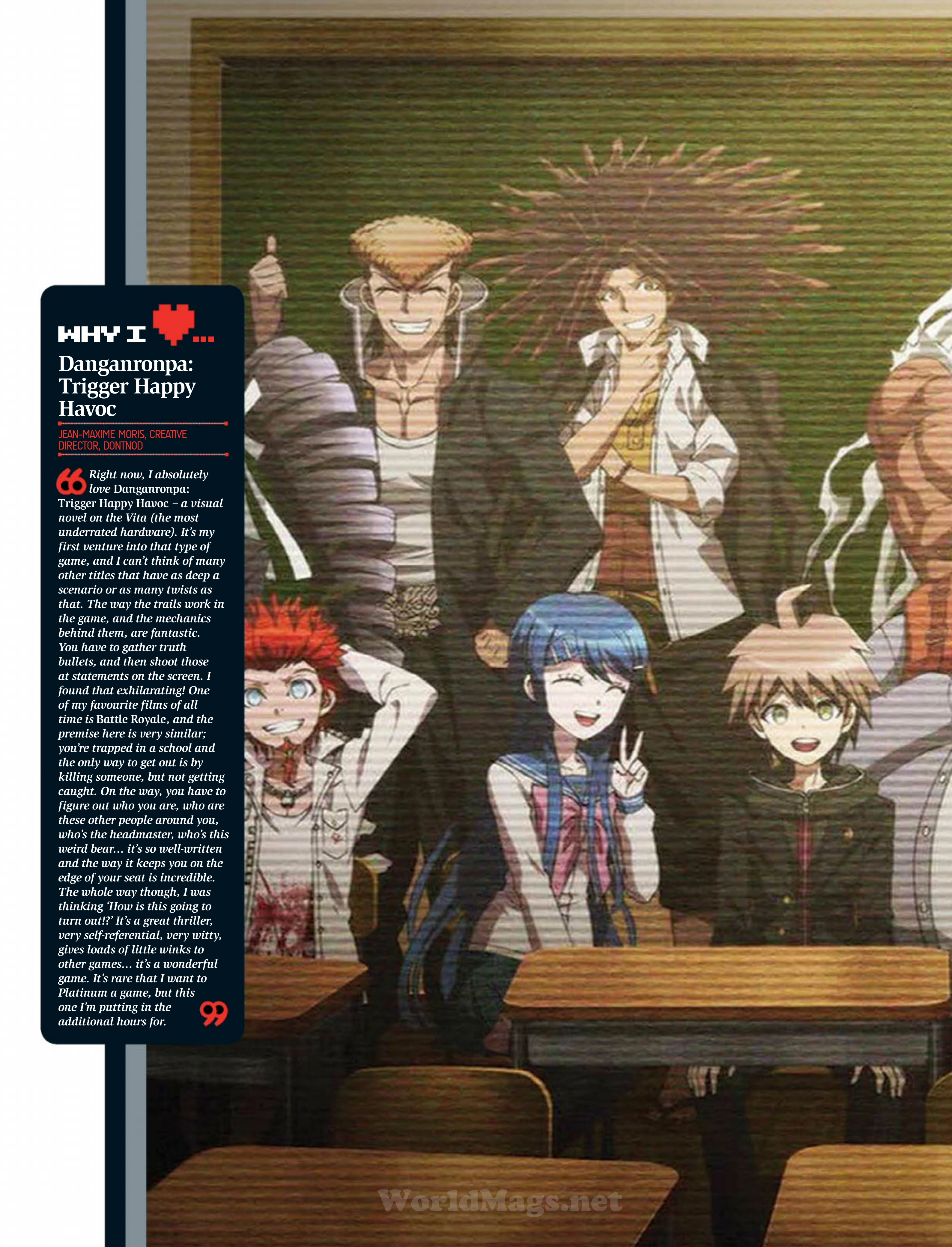


As well as game Achievements, the Xbox One has added media app unlocks for things like watching so many hours of Netflix.

I can't get away from feeling similarly about achievements. Now, of course, that's not true for every game [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: THEY'RE EVERYWHERE]. Some games, some brilliant games, are all about the metagame, the social interplay, the competition about hats [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: CONCEDING THE POINT]. But not all of them, and forcing achievements on all games is just dumb vandalism and insulting to developers and to gamers [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: SERIOUSLY TAKING IT SERIOUSLY?].

What's really telling is when you get devs who've managed to smuggle achievements away in really obscure places, just to satisfy the TRCs, TCRs or whatever variation it is [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: SOCKING IT TO THE MAN]. It's less the fact that this happens than the fact that publishers actually care so little about it either, that they let it happen – in which case, why continuing ruining the experience for the players who don't want the damn things in the first place and have no interest in the broccoli hat [ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED: WHAT'S YOUR BEEF WITH BROCCOLI, BOYO?]. Enough. Make it opt-in. Give players the choice you're always banging on about. Otherwise, stop wrecking games with banner ads. Being able to enjoy a game for more than twenty minutes without one of the little bastards wrecking the mood? I'd call that an achievement.

Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room, currently working on Everybody's Gone To The Rapture. His views aren't necessarily representative of games™



WHY I ❤…

Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc

JEAN-MAXIME MORIS, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, DONTNOD

Right now, I absolutely love Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc *– a visual novel on the Vita (the most underrated hardware). It's my first venture into that type of game, and I can't think of many other titles that have as deep a scenario or as many twists as that. The way the trails work in the game, and the mechanics behind them, are fantastic. You have to gather truth bullets, and then shoot those at statements on the screen. I found that exhilarating! One of my favourite films of all time is* Battle Royale, *and the premise here is very similar; you're trapped in a school and the only way to get out is by killing someone, but not getting caught. On the way, you have to figure out who you are, who are these other people around you, who's the headmaster, who's this weird bear… it's so well-written and the way it keeps you on the edge of your seat is incredible. The whole way though, I was thinking 'How is this going to turn out!?' It's a great thriller, very self-referential, very witty, gives loads of little winks to other games… it's a wonderful game. It's rare that I want to Platinum a game, but this one I'm putting in the additional hours for.*



> "You have to gather truth bullets, and then shoot those at statements on the screen. I found that exhilarating!"

JEAN-MAXIME MORIS, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, DONTNOD



Battlefield Hardline

CONCEPT ■ There's a war on the streets of the US as cops and robbers bring us classic *Battlefield* action with a new twist

Taking no prisoners

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: EA
Developer: Visceral Games
Release: 20 March 2015
Genre: FPS
Players: 1-TBC

Developer Profile

Now vice president and general manager at Visceral Games, Steve Papoutsis actually got his earliest credits working in sound design on titles like *Blood Omen: Legacy Of Kain* and *Gex 3D*. His first producer role would be on *Walt Disney World Quest: Magical Racing Tour*. Visceral and Papoutsis have come a long way.

Developer History

Blood Omen: Legacy Of Kain **1996 [PSone]**
The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King **2003 [Multi]**
Dead Space **2008 [Multi]**
Dead Space 2 **2011 [Multi]**

High Point

Breaking free of licensed titles to produce *Dead Space* made Visceral a developer to be reckoned with. Now it's earned the right to help push *Battlefield* and *Star Wars* forward with EA.

"**The way I would want people to evaluate and think about the game is, this is a *Battlefield* game.** It is a *Battlefield* game. It says *Battlefield* in the name; it is a *Battlefield* game. I'm hopeful people will look at it like a *Battlefield* game, so when they sit down and play the multiplayer they're evaluating it through that lens and then when they play the single-player they're evaluating it through that lens."

Such was the unequivocal stance of *Battlefield Hardline* executive producer Steve Papoutsis as we talked to him about Visceral's biggest challenge to date; both bringing some of its own creative vision to this established franchise whilst simultaneously shaking off the shadow of *Battlefield 4*. That shadow largely revolves around the multiplayer experience, which is probably not the position Papoutsis was expecting to find himself when Visceral began working on this project. Typically, *Battlefield*'s shortcomings have come from the single-player story modes and, from the outside looking in, it would appear that's exactly why Visceral was tapped to come in on the franchise. Now the message from the team has to be more balanced and the online portions have to be given a little buttressing.

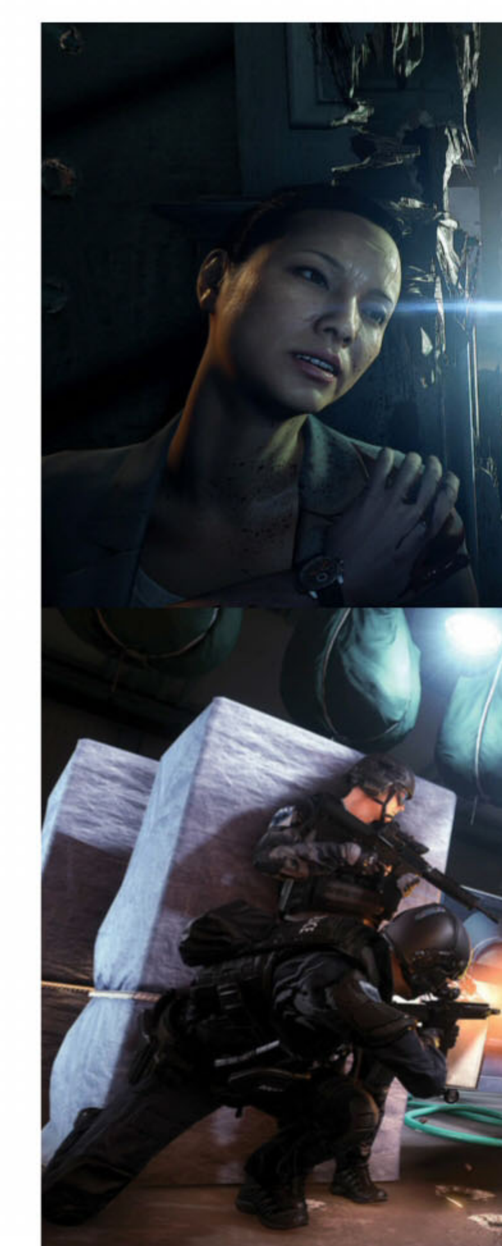
"Well, ultimately, the game is a multiplayer game," Papoutsis concedes. "We're putting a tremendous amount of work and effort behind the multiplayer portion of this game and hopefully people are going to be interested and excited to play the game because of the multiplayer, because of the ability to have those 'only in *Battlefield* moments' with the great rock, paper, scissors gameplay."

/// But there is much more to *Hardline* than that as Papoutsis was keen to state immediately: "I don't want people to think about our game or evaluate it only on the single-player, or only on the multiplayer. I think they have to look at the entire package we're putting together, because these games, these triple-A games, are just a huge undertaking – there are so many people at work on them, I think it would be shortsighted for people to only zero in on one piece. They need to evaluate the whole thing."

And perhaps there's been a little shortsightedness on the whole already from those looking to give *Battlefield Hardline* a kicking. Negativity surrounding the series thanks to server issues on *Battlefield 4* have spilled over into this title, with suggestions that it was nothing more than a reskinning of last year's game being top of the list of common gripes. "Yeah, that's definitely been a criticism we heard early: 'Oh it's just going to be a reskin or it's just going to be a DLC at best'," Papoutsis admits. "Obviously, as people working on it, that's absolutely not what we want to hear and that's absolutely not what we're doing."

> "Let's get this game out and see what the players say. If they enjoy it and they want more of it, hopefully the company will be like, 'Let's go do more of it'"
>
> STEVE PAPOUTSIS, VISCERAL GAMES

Visceral has taken its cops-versus-robbers setting seriously and looked for innovative ways not only for it to create an interesting solo experience, but also to feed into new modes and styles of play online too. "We created the heist mode that we had, which is kind of your classic bank caper – bad guys trying to break in and steal money, the police trying to stop them," explains Papoutsis. "We had that in the beta and that seemed to go over fairly well, as well as our blood money mode. But there were things that we

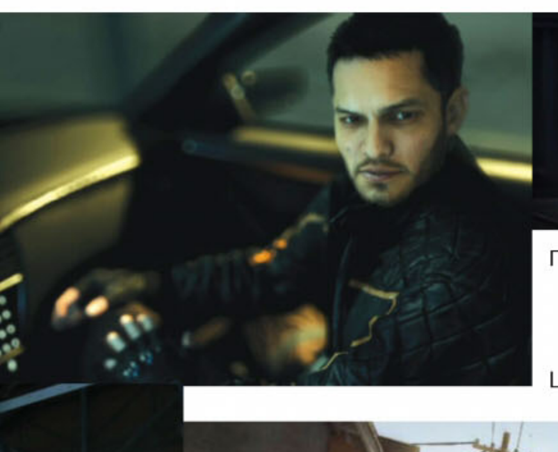


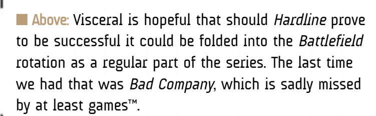


Below: Visceral spoke often with DICE about how to get the most from the Frostbite Engine, as it's Visceral's first time using it start to finish on a project.

HARDLINE & ORDER

WHEN THINKING ABOUT the cops-and-robbers theme for its new take on the *Battlefield* series, Visceral followed the white rabbit a little and came upon a tie-in concept of a TV show pacing for the game, giving the single-player an episodic structure. "We really like a lot of the crime dramas on TV and the way that they get paced out," executive producer Steve Papoutsis tells us. "Thinking of what most games would call a level as an episode has really helped us dial into the thinking about ways that TV episodes [work] and how they have an exciting incident at the beginning, some sort of big moment or turning point in the middle and then the way that they end – whether they end with a full conclusion or leave you with a cliffhanger."





Above: Visceral is hopeful that should *Hardline* prove to be successful it could be folded into the *Battlefield* rotation as a regular part of the series. The last time we had that was *Bad Company*, which is sadly missed by at least games™.



noticed coming out that we could improve to strengthen that tie to the fiction, so we've been incorporating that stuff."

/// And there has been a lot of feedback already. Visceral made the decision going into E3 that it not only wanted to reveal *Battlefield Hardline*, but also give fans the chance to play it immediately. To kick off a beta right after revealing the game was a bold move – one that may have even attracted more attention to the game than it was really ready for – but this led to a lot of useful feedback and ultimately fed the decision that the game needed more time.

"What happened was we got a ton of great information," Papoutsis tells us. "There are tons and tons of very passionate *Battlefield* veterans that have opinions, so we got a lot of good feedback and were encouraged to get that feedback. We got the feedback, we came back and we were like, 'wow, there's a ton of stuff here to do, how are we going to act on this with the release date in the near future?'. We talked about it and Andrew Wilson, our CEO, was behind the idea of 'let's listen to our players and give the development team an opportunity to incorporate the feedback that makes sense'."

But Papoutsis didn't want us to think it was all about fixing the multiplayer. "By nature of that, a lot of that attention goes into multiplayer, but the benefit of that is we're also getting more time with our single-player campaign to improve that. On that side, what we do on a regular basis is we bring our games to a place in the company called the game lab where we have a lot of outside people come in and focus test the game. We can sit down and watch them play the campaign, find out if certain areas are frustrating, check the difficulty, see if they understand the objectives and so on. So we're taking that information as well and incorporating that into the single-player side."

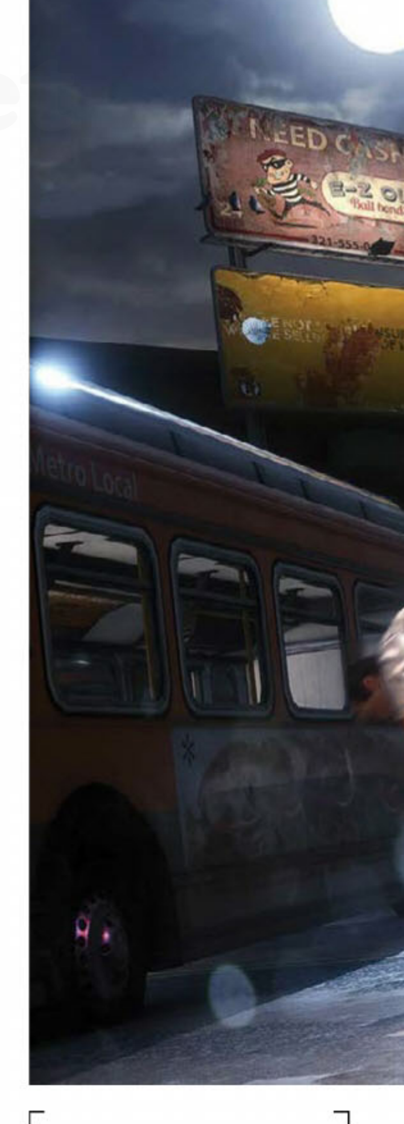
As an example of some of this feedback, it seems that Visceral was surprised to discover that it had perhaps been too conservative in its approach to giving *Battlefield* a new setting. The team had assumed that players would want multiplayer to be balanced in terms of the weapons available to both the cops and robbers in every game mode, but they fast discovered that wasn't the case.

"That was a good thing that came out of our beta," Papoutsis explains. "We'd made the assumption that people would want to have more symmetry between the sides, so have

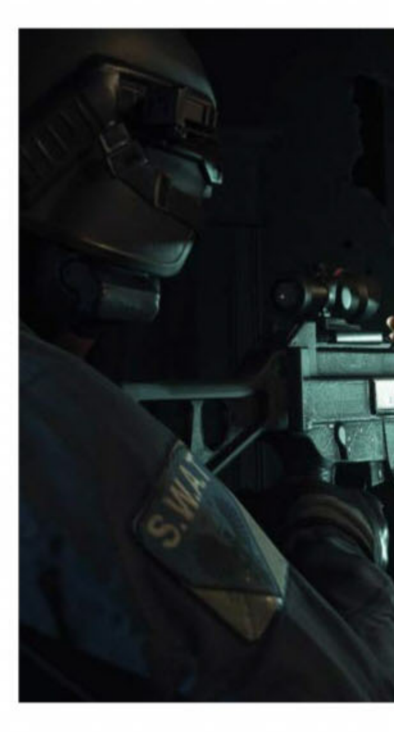
COMPELLING EVIDENCE

LOOKING AT THE most popular FPS titles, executive producer Steve Papoutsis revealed to us that Visceral had found a trend it felt it had to embrace in order to succeed; an emergent experience. "Looking at other games that have come out recently, the games that people really seem to be coming back to and enjoying are ones where they can have a different experience. So when you go to work or go to school or whatever the next day you're talking about it and your saying 'I had this mission or this quest', or whatever it is, 'and I approached it this way'. I think it's most interesting when people go, 'really? I did it this way' and then you think, 'I'm going to try it their way'."

> "We've put a lot of attention across the campaign in making sure it's a great-through-the-gun experience for the shooter fan"
>
> **STEVE PAPOUTSIS, VISCERAL GAMES**



Below: EA's motion capture facilities have come on leaps and bounds, in part thanks to its sports division.





Above: The surprise beta for *Hardline* that landed right after it was officially announced played a big part in the decision to delay the game. Visceral got so much feedback it felt compelled to hold the release until it could address fan demands.

Above: As well as the new cops and robbers multiplayer modes, *Battlefield Hardline* will also feature the classic multiplayer scenarios that fans have come to expect like team deathmatch and conquest.



them basically be the same." As a matter of fact, players didn't actually want to be able to use an AK-47 on both sides, but wanted to find a different and fresh experience on whichever team they found themselves playing. "Coming out of E3 we heard feedback that, no, people actually enjoyed the asymmetry. So that when they were playing on the criminal side, they did have different weapons. We've leaned into that and we've been incorporating that feedback, so we do have some asymmetry there between their weapons. Some of them are shared but there are specific ones that are not."

/// Now with the game delayed, Visceral is polishing the single-player to a crisp shine, working with DICE to make sure the multiplayer experience is the best it can be, and all the while fans are keeping their fingers crossed that it doesn't take months again to go from launch to a stable online experience. While Papoutsis seems confident that the game will be rock solid for launch, he appears to sympathise with the concern. "People want to make sure this launch is stable and they don't want to go through what they may have experienced previously with *Battlefield 4*," Papoutsis tells us. However, he also thinks there might be a more positive spin to the seemingly content reaction fans had to the delay announcement: "I think there's another story I pick up on, which is some people, because they're really enjoying *Battlefield 4* right now – because it is stable and the issues are behind it – that they want a little bit more time to enjoy that before they jump into the next thing."

Certainly, moving into 2015 and avoiding the wave of new titles that traditionally arrive at this time of year is going to give fans more time to appreciate what Visceral has put together. Attempting to find space for a game that has had a difficult year in terms of online stability when you've got *Call Of Duty* and *Halo* to play was going to be a tough ask. Now with some time on its own and a nice window in March to build an audience (the *Titanfall* slot, more or less), players can really sit with it and digest all the changes, large and small, that Visceral is pushing. The frantic pace of some of the cops and robbers multiplayer gameplay we've seen has been breathtaking, while the single-player looks intriguingly open to personal style and expression. If Papoutsis and his team have really taken on the feedback and kept refining both the core pillars of this franchise and Visceral's own spin on them, *Hardline* could be a very strong release in a few months time.

Inset: The *Witcher 2*'s worst feature was the combat, which felt too heavy and cumbersome on the console. This is being addressed in *Wild Hunt*.

Inset: *The Witcher* books – written by Andrzej Sapkowski – are largely inspired by local Polish folklores and landscapes, something largely evident in the rich fantasy setting.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

CONCEPT ■ Geralt embarks on his final adventure in CD Projekt Red's most ambitious RPG to date

A year later, we're almost there…

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Poland
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Developer: CD Projekt RED
Release: 24 February 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Responsible for Poland's finest gaming output, CD Projekt RED is a developer that has proved its ability with the earlier instalments of the *Witcher* series. Aside from *The Witcher*'s fantasy realms, CD Projekt RED has since announced *Cyberpunk 2077*: a sci-fi adventure with roots in the cult boardgame series of the same name. We have to say, everything the studio makes looks *lovely*.

Developer History

The Witcher **2007 [PC]**
The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings **2011 [Mac, PC, 360]**

High Point

The Witcher 2 demonstrated all the finest parts of a game developed for PC – deep, satisfying combat, high-resolution (and realistic) textures, and an intuitive, attractive UI. It didn't work as well on console, but that's not to say *The Witcher 3* won't…

We've covered *The Witcher 3* a lot – and that's the downside of games that give themselves ambitious release windows, only to have them pushed back. A lot of titles could get burnt out in this time – either remaining silent too long and losing interest, or revealing everything in a spurt of enthusiasm only to see a flaccid launch.

Thing is, CD Projekt RED's newest RPG is so vast – so deep and detailed – that the studio has never really run out of things to say about it. We admire that: the developer has managed to make an 18-month campaign out of nine months' worth of content, drip-feeding an RPG-hungry public with enough information to both inform and satisfy, while still keeping a lot of the more interesting, unique elements under wraps. Even as other RPGs begin to arrive on the latest generation of hardware, all eyes are firmly trained on *The Witcher* to deliver what we all hope will be the first truly next-gen role-playing experience.

We caught up with CD Projekt RED's head of marketing (and *Witcher* brand manager) Michal Platkow-Gilewski to talk about how the studio's kept *Wild Hunt*'s momentum ticking over, why it fell in love with *The Witcher*'s source material and what we can expect from the future of Poland's most famous development studio…

The Witcher 3 has been a visible presence in the industry for a good 18 months now – how hard has it been keeping the excitement for the game at a steady level?

If you look from my perspective – from a marketing and PR perspective – we announced the game in March last year, and we're still talking about it; releasing more and more information about it. So that's about two years of campaigning – this is not

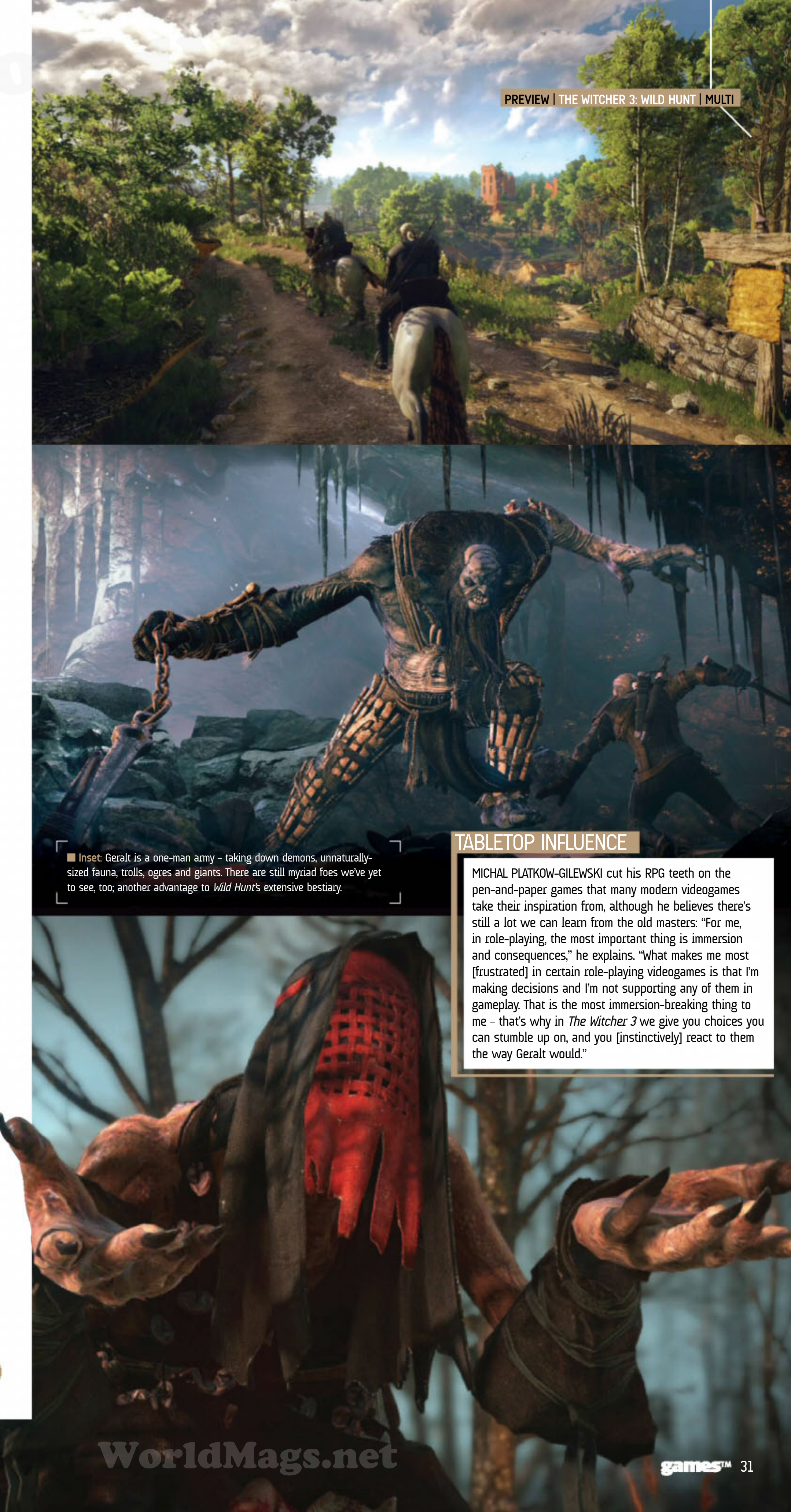
> "This game world is 35 times bigger than The Witcher 2 – that says it all"
> MICHAL PLATKOW-GILEWSKI, HEAD OF PR AND MARKETING, CD PROJEKT RED

normal, usually games have about a year of marketing prior to release. You have to plan the excitement – sharing the news in a good proportion: that campaign is a game in itself. [However] we've managed to keep people talking for over two years – it's a big game, and in a way we have been [incredibly] lucky that we can slowly unveil so much content.

What has been done to ensure players remain interested in the game, especially after the delay that set it back by almost a year?
From the start, we've been very open about *Wild Hunt*, sharing a lot and revealing a lot of features, so now it's harder and harder to [keep the momentum], but – thank God – we're confident enough to be able to show the game, give players hands on at events like [the Eurogamer Expo]. Even there, though, we only show 30 minutes of gameplay – the final product will be 200 times bigger than that, and that's why we think people will come back to it. This game world is 35 times bigger than *The Witcher 2* – that says it all.

The *Witcher* franchise takes its inspiration from a series of novels – what was the original motivation behind choosing those books as your source material to build a flagship franchise?
Well, the co-founders of CD Projekt RED were already *huge* fans of the *Witcher* series before they started the studio, so we were already really into our own IP before it existed. Right now people are coming to work for us because they know (and like) CD Projekt RED, but that wasn't the case to begin with – the staff thought 'Oh, I can make an RPG *and* I can work with *The Witcher* series' – it was a bigger magnet than the studio itself.

Has any of the work on *The Witcher 3* managed to influence how you're developing *Cyberpunk 2077* (also built on an existing IP), or vice-versa?
We know how to do role-playing games now. We learnt that from *The Witcher*. We also learnt how to tell mature stories – and by that, I mean stories that you can *believe*. We had the backbone in the *Witcher* of a fantasy world, but if you take away the fact that monsters are walking through the woods, you can believe the world. You can believe there are people that are driven by their needs – how they act, what they do, and why they do it. We want to put that factor into our next RPGs, to ground them in that central reality, but still operate in these worlds that are not possible.



Inset: Geralt is a one-man army – taking down demons, unnaturally-sized fauna, trolls, ogres and giants. There are still myriad foes we've yet to see, too; another advantage to *Wild Hunt*'s extensive bestiary.

TABLETOP INFLUENCE

MICHAL PLATKOW-GILEWSKI cut his RPG teeth on the pen-and-paper games that many modern videogames take their inspiration from, although he believes there's still a lot we can learn from the old masters: "For me, in role-playing, the most important thing is immersion and consequences," he explains. "What makes me most [frustrated] in certain role-playing videogames is that I'm making decisions and I'm not supporting any of them in gameplay. That is the most immersion-breaking thing to me – that's why in *The Witcher 3* we give you choices you can stumble up on, and you [instinctively] react to them the way Geralt would."



Guilty Gear Xrd -Sign-

CONCEPT ■ Arc System Works' debut on the PS4, *Guilty Gear* finally breaks free of its sprite-based constraints and wanders into the glorious realm of 3D

Bedman bedlam

While everyone's busy clamouring over the upcoming PS4 exclusive powerhouses like *Uncharted 4*, *The Order: 1886* and *No Man's Sky*, few other exclusives get a look-in. There's another exclusive that's been busy putting out trailers, demos and art while the gaming community picks apart others, and that is Arc System Works' *Guilty Gear Xrd –Sign-*.

It's a terrible name, we agree, but the game looks like it'll be anything but: after sinking a few hours into the Arcade mode, we've fallen in love with it. The 3D models Arc is using to flesh out its 2D game are gorgeous – execute a special move and the camera will swing into the action like its on a giant steady-cam arm, giving you new perspectives on the proceeding. It sounds jarring for a 2D fighter, but it works surprisingly well. It's the best-looking cel-shaded game we've seen on a console, making even the newly released *Sunset Overdrive* look archaic. Yet, it's built on the Unreal 3 engine – something we're really struggling to get our heads around amid news that a lot of Japanese games are moving to Unreal 4 and still not managing to look as good.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PS3
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sega / Aksys Games
Developer: Arc System Works
Release: 16 December (NA)
Players: 2

Developer Profile

Operating since 1998, Arc System Works has been at the top of the alternative fighting game scene – offering players options besides *Street Fighter*, basically. Comfortable with its own IP, it's amazing that Arc System Works never runs out of mechanics to play with or craziness to filter; every release is as fresh as the last

Developer History

Guilty Gear
1998 [PlayStation]
BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger
2008 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC, PSP]
Persona 4 Arena Ultimax
2014 [PS3, Xbox 360]

STORM RISE

■ THE LUDICROUSLY melodramatic weather effects recall the sense of time-lapse incredulousness we've seen in the *GRAW* games. The dynamic weather system throws in a *Blade Runner*-esque cinematic downpour rather than a more realistic light drizzle, yet these kind of cosmetic touches play an important role in showing off the PS4 (the console that we tried the demo on).

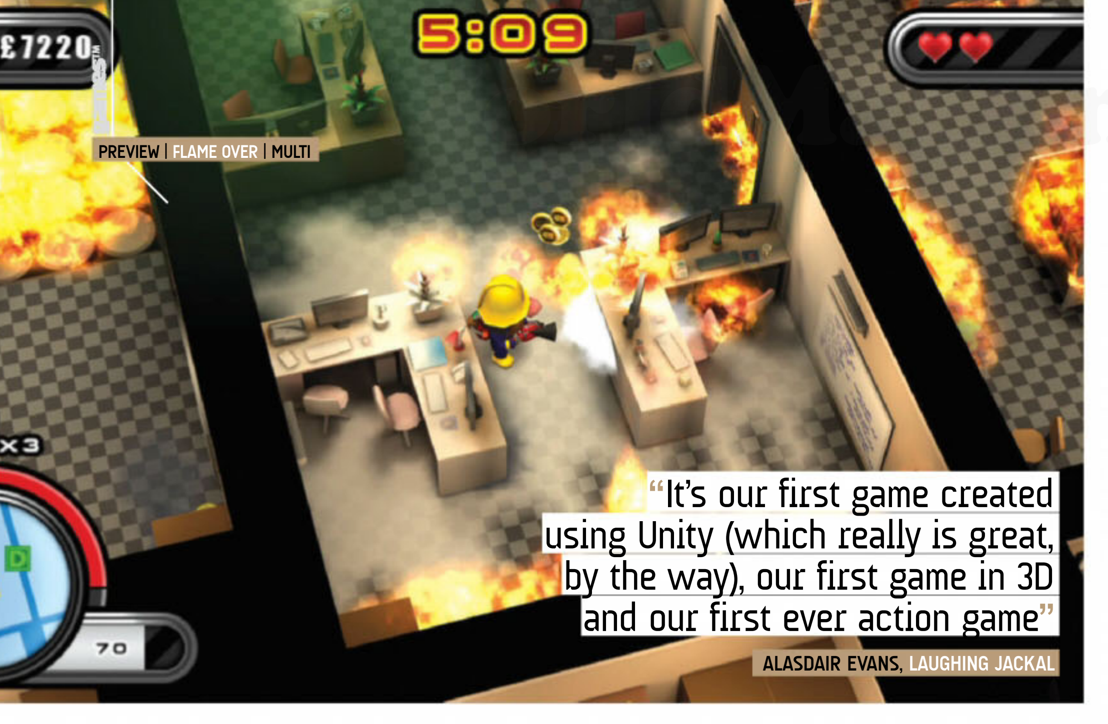


A NEW CHALLENGER APPROACHES...

ASIDE FROM A ton of returning favourites, *Xrd* features a couple of interesting newcomers – the most interesting being the bizarrely named Bedman: a man that is, surprisingly enough, confined to a living hospital bed. There's also two characters already confirmed as DLC add-ons – *Overture*'s Sin, and another newcomer, Elphelt. Series-newcomer Ramlethal Valentine – the game's boss – will also be playable.

NEXT-GEN FIGHTER

GUILTY GEAR XRD is an ambitious game – director Daisuke Ishiwatari plans to make it a refresh for the series, opening it up to a wider audience (which shouldn't be too hard, considering it'll be the only fighter on the PS4 system at launch). The game will also be cross-compatible between PS3 and PS4 consoles, meaning a wider install-base and longer online lifespan than 2D fighters traditionally secure.



"It's our first game created using Unity (which really is great, by the way), our first game in 3D and our first ever action game"

ALASDAIR EVANS, LAUGHING JACKAL



Every fire you put out will earn you coins, which can then be invested in things for quicker room clear-outs. But the real reason to keep playing is the random office levels.

Flame Over

CONCEPT Prove your firefighting skills by putting out the flames in a series of challenging, randomly generated buildings, saving as many people as you can

This is seriously hot stuff

Will the roguelike trend wear itself too thin soon? That seems to be the way of gaming trends after all and right now the roguelike is at an all time high. Virtually every game around is delivering permadeath and survival gameplay. But what's often fun about these trends is that towards their peak, you start to get some interest mash-ups and twists on the traditional idea. That's where *Flame Over* steps in.

Rather than being a *Don't Starve*-style survivalist adventure, *Flame Over* randomly builds office floors based on pre-existing templates, sets them on fire and then throws you in to deal with them. Your challenge is to get the fires put out and save all the people in the building as fast as you can before your timer runs out and the Grim Reaper appears to take you away.

We'll get back to the Reaper in a moment and concentrate on the gameplay for now, as it's pretty tough. Using the left and right bumpers to spray your limited supplies of water and foam over the building, you can move the camera around with the right stick. However, while hosing down the world around you, the right stick becomes your directional control, meaning coordinated fingers are a must. We found electrical fires to be a particular challenge as they need foam to put them out, otherwise they'll keep coming back. Also, as long as fires are raging they can spit fireballs around the room, leading to more stuff catching alight.

Searching your randomly-generated map for the electrical switch is a must to speed up your run and save your supplies. Partial refills can be found in fire extinguishers and water fountains as you travel, as well as full refills in the safe room you lead survivors to. Resource management is essential, as is knowing how different materials behave. Carpet, for instance, can send waves of flame at you if not properly doused and will dry out to kick off again if the room isn't cleared.

And then the Grim Reaper starts chasing you. We died plenty of times as we got to grips with the speedy pace and intense challenges placed in front of us, but delay your escape and the Reaper will emerge, passing through walls and chasing you away. Saving civilians will increase your timer and saving cats will add hearts to your health, but one touch from the Reaper and it's game over, a la *Spelunky*. This is representative of the sense of humour and challenge to be found in *Flame Over*. As puzzle titles on PS Vita go, we can see this one becoming a real cult favourite.

Other world styles are being added to the game, so it won't all be office blocks. Expect some challenging new materials too.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS Vita
Origin: UK
Publisher: Laughing Jackal
Developer: In-house
Release: Q1 2015
Genre: Roguelike
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 2005 and starting out with some Nintendo DS and Wii releases, Laughing Jackal has been quietly building a reputation for itself with Sony thanks to its consistently, and often rather good, PlayStation Mini titles. Flame Over will be its first PS Vita release using *Unity*.

Developer History

Cubixx **2010 [PSP]**
Vibes **2010 [PSP]**
OMG-Z **2** **2011 [PSP]**
Cubixx HD **2011 [PS3]**

High Point

The release of *Cubixx* HD on PS3 marked a big step up for the studio and it remains a possibility that *Flame Over* could be made available for PS4 too.





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Hyper Light Drifter

CONCEPT ■ Collectors of technology and knowledge, the Drifters search barren wastelands, but this Drifter is suffering from an illness and is searching desperately for a cure

An indie with plenty of heart and brains

Heart Machine has managed to skirt a very fine line between familiar and derivative. While *Hyper Light Drifter* engulfs you in the former, it manages never to feel like the later. For a game that wears its retro influences on its sleeve, that's an incredibly challenging thing to pull off.

The early access build of *Hyper Light Drifter* shows incredible promise for the full release on next-gen platforms, Steam and Vita. The combat is crisp and meaty, especially pleasing from a top-down 2D title, the room design varied, animation rich with detail and the challenge biting. The development team set out to make a game that merged *Link To The Past* with elements of *Diablo* and a roguelike and that's been beautifully achieved. However, it's some of the other touchstones we noticed that really give this game so much additional character of its own.

The light, foreboding music that plays under much of the game was instantly reminiscent of Zebes in *Super Metroid*. But where Samus has the reassurance of her blaster to protect her against whatever threat hides behind the next door, the Drifter has no such protection. You walk into this dark, hostile place with nothing but a sword and the ability to dash around a little.

Soon you get a blaster with very limited ammo, then a slightly more potent gun, still with little ammo and perhaps you'll even find the remote control grenade. But virtually nothing is sure-fire in the world. Bar a couple of smaller, annoying creatures that can be dispatched in a single swipe, most enemies need some kind of tactical approach to kill and when they're mixed up and in numbers, the challenge escalates immensely. Throw in narrow pathways, and unprotected edges that you (or your enemies) can fall down with one misstep and it's a brutally challenging world to try and navigate, let alone survive at times.

/// Which brings us nicely to the overall sense of punishment *Hyper Light Drifter* embraces and teaches you to appreciate as you play. You can take maybe five heavy hits before dying and respawning. There are no manual checkpoints here though that we could find, so you go back to the beginning of the room/area. That can mean travelling back through a couple of segments to get to where you died, but typically we found it just close enough not to be too annoying, but far enough to let us know we really need to play a little more cautiously or cleverly next time.

With a limited array of moves and more complex and challenging enemies around each corner, you really have to think on your feet playing this game, managing the limited resources placed around an area, conserving ammo for the big threats and generally being inquisitive enough to find the hidden assistance that could be there for the finding.

And it is a wonderful looking world to explore. In parts packed with ancient glyphs and signs of civilisation and then suddenly becoming very mechanical and robotic, it's intriguing, not to mention the gorgeous palette of colours Heart Machine draws from at every turn. Subtle gradients appear to cover every surface giving what might otherwise be bare rooms greater texture.

This early build of the game was full of promise and felt very close to being finished in most areas. The only weak spot we really noticed was with the camera, which sometimes felt a little jolty as it attempts to keep the Drifter towards the centre of the screen. It's a small judder that can bring you out of the experience, but hopefully something that can be solved before the final release. *Hyper Light Drifter* was already a great concept with an instantly captivating art style, but now it's great to see that it's delivering on the side of hardcore, retro-steeped gameplay too. This could well sit up there with (or even surpass) the beautiful and engaging *Transistor* as we go into 2015.

> "Though we're working incredibly hard, we still have much to do. More levels, more enemies, more weapons; so many things!"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, HEART MACHINE

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC, PS Vita, Wii U
Origin: USA
Publisher: Heart Machine
Developer: In-house
Release: Q1 2015
Genre: Adventure
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

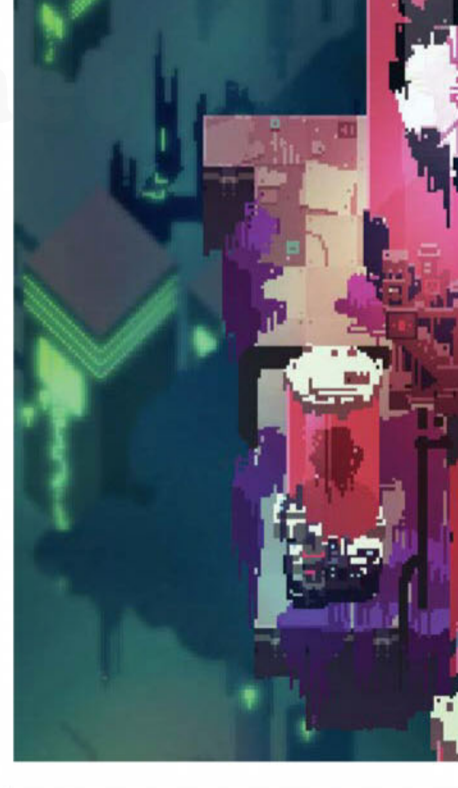
This will be Heart Machine's first title, with the studio at present comprised of artist, illustrator, designer and mind behind the game Alex Preston and Beau Blyth as programmer who you may know from *Samurai Gunn*. Disasterpeace brings his *Fez* music success to a new indie.

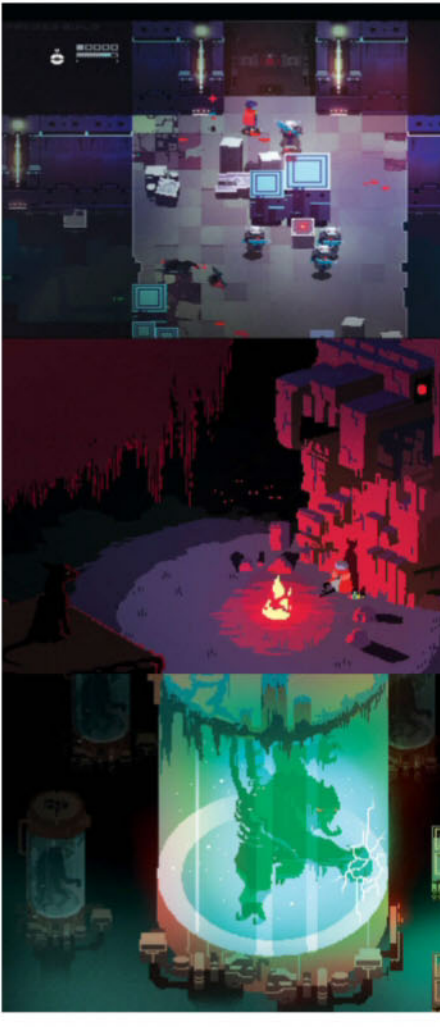
Developer History

Samurai Gunn **2013 [PC]**
Fez **2012 [Multi]**
Action Fist! **2010 [PC]**

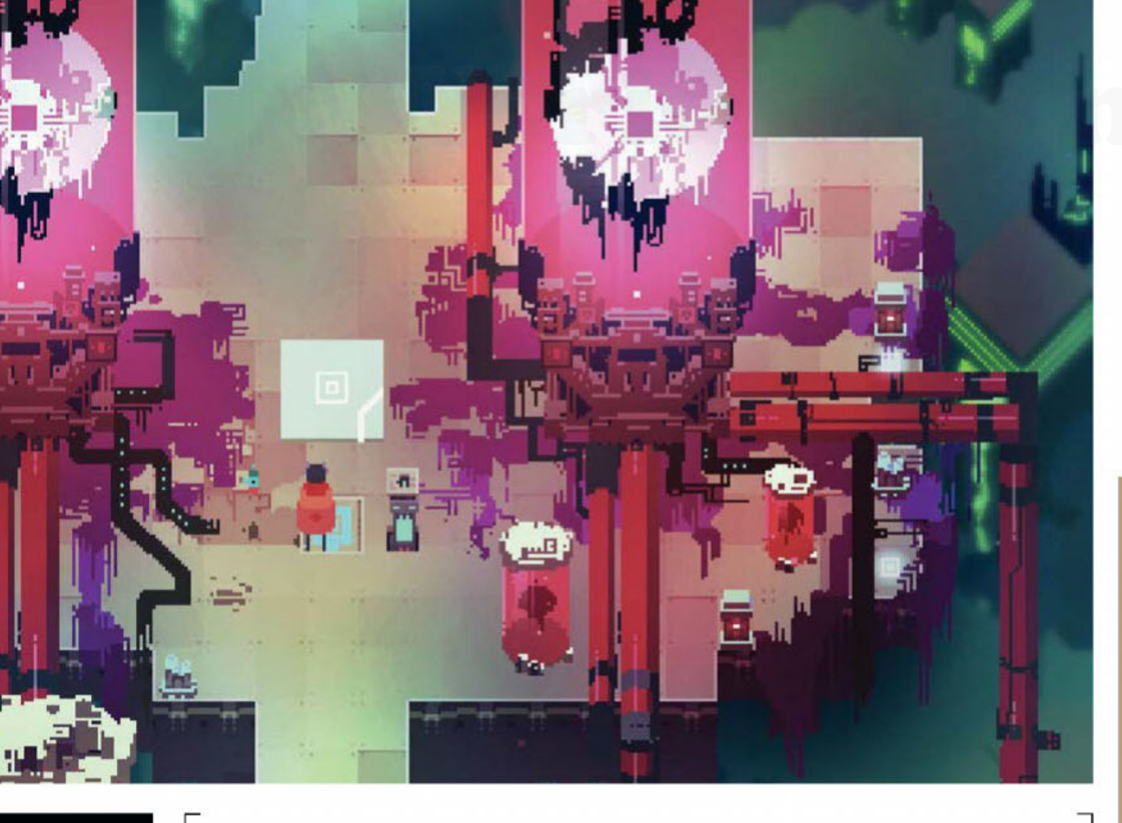
High Point

While *Fez* is the biggest project anyone on this team has been involved with, Samurai Gunn is the more relevant title to look at for the core development team.





■ Right: We understand that Alex Preston was inspired to make this game from years of dealing with his own illnesses, including a heart condition.



■ Turquoise and pink are colours that run right through this game and although that means that it's packed with colour in every room, there's still an eerie darkness to the game. Proof that 'dark' games can be more than brown and grey. Left: Limited ammo means that while your guns and grenades can be pretty powerful, they need to be used very sparingly.

MUSICAL PEDIGREE

THE HAUNTING MUSIC of *Hyper Light Drifter*, which we found to be a highlight of the demo, was composed by Disasterpeace (AKA Rich Vreeland) of *Fez* fame. Disasterpeace has been developing videogame soundtracks for many years having enjoyed success on games like *Drawn To Life: The Next Chapter*, but it was *Fez* that really brought attention to his work and *Hyper Light Drifter* shows a deft touch and sense of atmosphere that's always been there his work, but is far more apparent now. It never gets too heavy handed in the demo, although the clips we've heard from trailers would suggest he ramps up the tension rather nicely deeper into the game.



Resident Evil Revelations 2

CONCEPT ■ *Revelations 2* breaks the mould of standard *Resident Evil* games and approaches horror from an episodic standpoint – featuring co-op gameplay, unexpectedly powerful zombies and sisterly bonding

The lunatics have taken over the asylum

The announcement of *Revelations 2* was perhaps one of the lesser well-kept secrets in the games industry, but that did little to suppress just how surprising it is that it even exists. *Revelations* wasn't the most compelling *Resident Evil* experience to grace our consoles, and its inception as a 3DS exclusive did little to rally excitement among jaded *Resi* veterans… yet the game managed to find a substantial audience (perhaps due to the 3DS' scant offerings back in early 2012 on release), gaining more traction when the game was rereleased in HD a year later for Xbox 360, PS3, PC and Wii U. As the main series has become more and more underwhelming, *Revelations* proved Capcom still had its finger on the pulse and in light of the current triple-A horror renaissance the industry is living through, its timing couldn't be better. We played through the first few levels, extracting the five most pertinent points…

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
Release: 17 February 2015 (US)
Players: 1-2 (local)

Developer Profile

Responsible for some of the most ground-breaking franchises in gaming history; Capcom has been at the front of most genres at one time or another, though the company did attract a lot of criticism when it decided to rely a little too heavily on DLC a few years ago…

Developer History

Dead Rising 3
2013 [Xbox One]
Lost Planet 3
2013 [Multi]
Resident Evil 6
2012 [Multi]

High Point

Capcom's best offering is *Ōkami*; visually appealing, unique and touching, *Ōkami* was a risk that paid off back when publishers could afford to take risks.

1 IT'S ACTUALLY A GOOD CO-OP HORROR EXPERIENCE…

WE'RE DUBIOUS ABOUT how well horror can handle co-op (see *Dead Space 3*): after all, a true horror experience is supposed to excite the senses – enact a consistent feeling of dread. When you've got another person ready to step in and resurrect you or help you out, it takes away the feeling of consequence. Luckily for *Revelations 2* then, playing as either returning Claire Redfield or newcomer Moira Burton isn't really about survival per se – it's more arcade-y than that: a dynamic puzzle game tasking you with making the most of scant resources, with an emphasis on exploration and a little back-and-forth puzzle-solving – perfect for picking away at with friends.

1



4



3



"Each of the four episodes will feature hours of terrifying gameplay ending with dramatic cliff-hangers that will leave players fully engrossed and anticipating the next twist in the gripping horror story"

CAPCOM, RESIDENT EVIL 2 PRESS RELEASE

2 IT'S FULL OF THAT TRADEMARK RESIDENT EVIL ATMOSPHERE...

THE LEVEL WE played through was a condemned mental asylum, and as Claire Redfield regains consciousness, there's some scratchy voice quoting Franz Kafka at her (because why not?) and with the help of the foul-mouthed Moira, you quickly discover you're playing a part in some kind of *Saw*-like experiment (you've got a tracking device of sorts disturbingly attached to your wrist…) The game looks like its predecessor – that is to say don't expect any feats of graphical wonder here – but we think it actually gains something from this vague presentation: it all ties into the eerie, threatening ambience the game thrives on.

3 WHEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT, IT REALLY MAKES YOU FIGHT...

THE UPSIDE OF having two playable characters that you can flit between on a whim is that *Revelations 2* can turn up the combat dial a little – Claire, being a Redfield – can inflict the most damage, arming herself with guns and some impressive melee moves. Moira is support – armed with a crowbar and a flashlight, she can stun enemy undead with her bulb (for some reason, the evil residents of the game are now afraid of light), execute downed enemies and jimmy open locked doors. The dodge mechanic has also been reconsidered – Claire can now deftly move out the way at will, rather than waiting for a laggy and immersion-breaking prompt. It all works for the best.

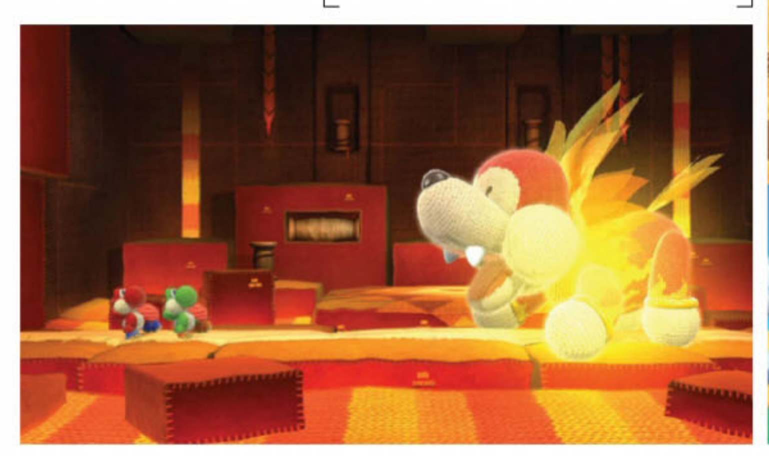
4 IT'S BEING RELEASED EPISODICALLY...

WE GOT TO play the first of four planned chapters of *Revelations 2*, and we're eager to go back into it. While it remains spiritually in line with the splinter series' first outing, the tweaks and improvements got us curious: where will Moira and Claire end up? How will the co-op mechanics (or character switching, if you're playing alone) be used to greater effect? Will there be any more ridiculous bosses? Incremental releases are becoming more popular now, sometimes to the detriment of the games they're supposed to be prolonging. *Resident Evil* has a touch of horror TV to it, though, (think *Hannibal*, *True Detective*) and we think it's got the momentum to keep us interested.

5 IT'S NOT RESIDENT EVIL 6...

MANY BELIEVE THAT *Resident Evil 6* is the worst in the series history – if only for a few of the shoe-horned campaigns and lacklustre level designs. We can't praise Capcom's decision enough in breaking up the series to travel down two paths – giving players that want that classic *Resi* gameplay *Revelations*, while being more experimental with the main series. It's a shame we won't see *Revelations 2* on 3DS – the original was one of the console's stronger titles of its early life, and it would have been nice to see some co-op modes on the newer larger 3DS machines (the second stick would make *all* the difference).

Below: The boss fights promise to be laid out in unique ways that will inevitably require players to think a little more laterally than they would in *Mario* games.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Good-Feel
Release: Spring 2015
Genre: Platformer
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Good-Feel is one of the few developers Nintendo is letting deal with its IP – and there's a reason for that. The studio began its life making educational games for the Nintendo DS, using the console's unique functionality to appeal to a younger audience. After making *Wario Land: Shake It* for the Wii, Good-Feel won Nintendo's trust.

Developer History

Wario Land: Shake It **Wii [2008]**
Kirby's Epic Yarn **Wii [2010]**
Mii Force **3DS [2013]**

High Point

Kirby's Epic Yarn was the 10th official *Kirby* game, and proved that although the little pink blob has been around for a while, there's still a lot of new mechanics and ideas left in the lil' fella.

Yoshi's Woolly World

CONCEPT The follow-up to the quietly successful *Yoshi's Island, Woolly World* takes the huggable woollen aesthetic Nintendo trialled in *Kirby's Epic Yarn* and applies it to everyone's favourite green lizard-dinosaur thing

Making platforming tactics a bit more tactile

A *Yoshi* game is like a *Mario* game, except you can create and throw eggs, and maybe the mount's jump is a little higher. Outside of that, a lot of Nintendo's platforming games rely largely on the same foundations – interesting level design and a variety of activities to prevent boredom from ever creeping in. *Yoshi's New Island* proved that with its lacklustre reviews and lukewarm reception, even from lifelong Nintendo fans. *Yoshi's Woolly World* wants to apologise for that lapse in quality, and double down on what Nintendo means when it slaps its gold Seal of Approval on something.

First off, you're not fighting against Kamek the Koopa's questionable intentions in his attempts to capture Baby Mario – this is a Yoshi game, and it's a wholly Yoshi affair. Yoshi is a tangible entity now, and his promotion to one-and-only leading lizard means he's taking on a few more traditional game mechanics: there's no countdown timer acting as a rudimentary health bar, and the game has been made as a co-operative experience. Yes, you can play through it solo, but like *LittleBigPlanet*, the game operates much better when you've got someone else blasting through the levels with you.

The co-op mode owes a lot to the gameplay in the *New Super Mario Bros.* games (an unsurprising pattern, considering Tezuka worked closely on both). Because this is a *Yoshi* game, however, a lot of the mechanics revolve around egg-hatching and throwing, including the option to turn allies into eggs and hurl them at opponents – something that will practically paralyse your friends. We're excited by the idea of this, as it opens up a lot of interesting platforming designs, but we're also cautious of the large potential such a mechanic has for trolling.

> "Explore the world by using yarn to weave wool platforms and warp pipes to reach new areas"
> PRESS RELEASE NINTENDO

The game also takes advantage of the Wii U's graphic capabilities (something we're really warming to, especially considering how nice *Super Smash Bros.*, *Bayonetta 2* and *Mario Kart* looked). Unlike *Kirby's Epic Yarn*, *Woolly World* has fully rendered 3D models, and almost looks like each thread is voxel-based, with characters exploding in a flurry of unravelling thread whenever the character in question takes enough damage. There's depth and volume to everything, and somehow Good-Feel has even managed to make the invisible thread that keeps the platforms suspended look great.

While *Woolly World* might not be the most lucrative property Nintendo could have thought about (*Woolly Mario* might have been better?) it's certainly something different on the Wii U's impressive selection of console exclusives. It's the *LittleBigPlanet* of the Wii U, and what's not to be excited about?



Above: Since Yoshi is going to spend so much time touching cloth, Good-Feel has made sure the textures in the game all look authentic and unique; each level seemingly made of a new kind of fabric.

Crossing The Line

CONCEPT ■ In the aftermath of his wife's murder in a terrorist attack, a detective begins his own investigation to find the truth and discovers a crossing between this world and the land of the dead

From Russia with love

Grief can do funny things to you, even let you open up portals to the land of the dead. Or so things are in *Crossing The Line*, a hugely ambitious independent shooter that's reaching further and deeper than a two-developer team might be expected to reach. Taking the premise of a downtrodden and grieving chief police detective and giving him the ability to cross between worlds as he investigates his wife's death may not seem immediately challenging, but this is a CryEngine FPS title that is starting to feel like *The Darkness* with all the comic book trappings stripped out.

Crossing The Line isn't just dark, it's pitch black. There's a lot of promise to the simple and potent backstory to Edward Mason, our protagonist, in this game. While the idea of a tortured soul isn't exactly unheard of, his detective thinking may bring a different take to the idea of crossing between realities than we've seen before. With his wife killed in a terrorist attack there's already a lot of additional baggage brought to this story, not to mention suggestions of alcoholism on Mason's part as he struggles with the loss. Not that such baggage is the most original idea we've ever heard. Husbands losing their wives and getting angry about it seems like something we've seen a fair amount of in our videogames over the years. At the very least, we're expecting a game that treats the core concept with a little more seriousness than we saw in *Murdered: Soul Suspect*. For one, there's going to be some real consequence to moving between the realms.

How exactly Mason comes to be able to move between worlds we hope to discover as we play, but for now we know it comes at an expense. You'll be able to freely move between the physical world and escaping your body to be in the world of the spirits at certain points in the game. In this state you can still attack enemies, albeit crushing their souls rather than shooting them with bullets. However, staying for any period of time in the world of the dead drains your health, making you more vulnerable. In other words, stay too long among the dead and that's what you'll become too. While it may salve Mason's grief, it won't get him any closer to solving the murder.

Alternatively Mason can 'crash' the two realms into one another, unleashing the monsters of the other side into the physical world. There's a great benefit to this in that these creatures will start attacking those in your way, however, they'll be just as happy to take a chunk out of you too. It should allow for the kind of variation in play style that we've come to expect from triple-A shooters, embracing all-out action, stealth and now the supernatural too. Not bad for a team of two.

The level of realism achieved with CryEngine by Zomboko is very impressive. The settings revealed so far all feel very familiar and typical, which should make for a fantastic contrast with some of the supernatural creatures and effects that have been revealed so far. The additional benefit of working with CryEngine is that it is a great multiplatform base to work from. PC and Linux are at the forefront of plans for *Crossing The Line* at the moment, but next-gen consoles may not be too far behind. And Linux means this could be one of the first games that SteamBox players will get to enjoy on their new consoles.

> "The main idea of the game is an ability to cross the line between the physical world and so called shadow world"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, ZOMBOKO ENTERTAINMENT

The Zomboko duo has dug deep already on this project and while it's very early days there's an ambition and scope to *Crossing The Line* that speaks volumes about their confidence. We've seen games a little like this, but not from so unique a viewpoint or delivered so rich with detail. Some of it seems a little derivative, but we're willing to forgive that for the time being to see how this new indie team shakes out. We're keen to know more about what will be hiding on the other side of this game, but we'll just have to wait. Given the size of this team, we can't see it being fast-tracked to market anytime soon.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Russia
Publisher: Zomboko Entertainment
Developer: In-House
Release: 2015
Genre: FPS
Players: 1

Developer Profile

The Zomboko team currently consists of 3D artist and game designer Artyom Mironov and concept artist Kirill Bulgakov. This is the first major credit either has to their name, making this quite an ambitious project out of the gate. Thanks to CryEngine, *Crossing The Line* is more polished than most indie releases.

High Point

As the first game for either Artyom Mironov or Kirill Bulgakov, there's not much to report, although Bulgakov's excellent concept art can be seen on DeviantArt and other portals. *Crossing The Line* could also be one of the first SteamOS games.





■ Above: While much of *Crossing The Line* appears to be set in urban areas, these woodland and field images hint to darker regions to explore.



Above: Some of the detail achieved through the CryEngine in this game is really quite superb. While some of these settings may strike you as relatively mundane, they will likely be the staging ground for bizarre supernatural events. Below: There's something inherently creepy about a bunch of silhouettes standing motionless in the distance. What are they waiting for? In *Crossing The Line* we probably don't want to find out.

THREE ITEMS OR LESS

IN KEEPING WITH the overall realism of Crossing The Line (besides the supernatural land of the dead part), Zomboko has opted to work with a strict three-weapon carrying system. It's a solid choice, popularised of course by *Halo* and continued to this day by titles like *Call Of Duty*. Hand guns, rifles and automatic weapons will all be present apparently, but don't expect any of these firearms to offer you much protection in the dead realm. There you will need something completely different to protect you. What form that will take exactly is another small mystery we'll have to wait to discover as *Crossing The Line* continues to emerge from the shadows.



Left: There are a series of pre-made levels you can load up, or you can jump into a barren, strategy-friendly land instead – which is always the mode we prefer. Below: Like *Team Fortress*, there are a variety of interesting weapons at your disposal that you can use to wreak havoc on your enemies.



Block 'N' Load

CONCEPT ■ Bored of the standard FPS shooter? Ever wish you could burrow down below the ground and pop up on your enemies or jet up to that sniper's camping spot? Now you can!

Are you bricking it?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Jagex
Developer: In-house (with Artplant)
Release: 2015
Genre: Level-making FPS
Players: 2-10 (online)

Developer Profile

Jagex made its name (and its substantial bank of profit) with *RuneScape*, and has used the revenue from the game to tackle more diverse and interesting projects as the company has matured. Still independent, and still successful, *Block 'N' Load* is probably the biggest Jagex launch in years.

Developer History

RuneScape **PC [2001]**
Ace of Spades **PC [2012]**
Transformers Universe [beta] **PC [2014]**

High Point

RuneScape has been around for over a decade – no mean feat for a small British studio. It continues to attract new players whilst retaining a healthy amount of long-time fans.

Imagine *Minecraft* meets *Team Fortress* – we imagine that's the elevator pitch someone must have made at Jagex shortly before *Block 'N' Load* begun development. Because that's exactly what the alpha feels like – a combination of block-based construction and destruction tied in with some fast-paced, class-based action. *Block 'N' Load* wants to fundamentally change the landscape (pardon the pun) of the modern FPS, mixing up the standard 'Spawn, shoot, kill, die' rhythm in favour of something a little more… creative.

It's amazing this idea hasn't been thought of before, really; it's so *obvious*. At the start of each 5v5 match, you have the option to choose from a range of predetermined classes, each with their own speciality – there's a ninja whose traps inflict the highest damage but appears to be something of a glass cannon; there's an engineer who can erect turrets; a medical character with an array of needles and the ability to throw down healing blocks… The key to success in any *Block 'N' Load* game is cohesion and communication; there's no point in everyone being the powerful robot character because then who will be healing? In that respect, it's like *Team Fortress*.

But from then on it moves into *Minecraft* territory – at the start of each round, you begin a 'Build Phase' where you can either entrench your troops in the grid-like battlefield (complete with its own stratus levels) or build *up* – putting down sturdy metal blocks to defend your base from attack. But it's not all about defence in this mode, either: you can think tactically ahead – laying down jump-pads (handy for the Ninja, who can glue to walls and run vertically when they land), nests (which let you respawn) or turrets behind walls, so you can knock down one block and create a bottle-neck right off the starting gun.

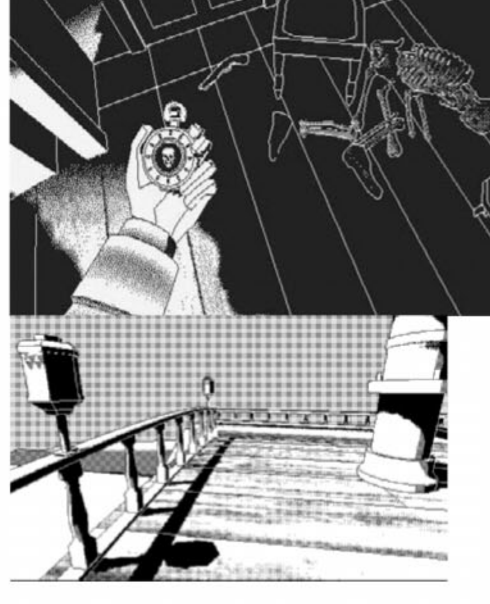
We've had the game in the office for about a week already, and we can safely say no two games play out the same way – even if you deploy with the same characters on each team, time after time. The game manages to meld its lo-fi art style with a fast-paced and yet – somehow – incredibly strategic game, a marriage that feels unnatural, uncomfortable and yet… ostensibly playable.

There's been no solid console announcement made for *Block 'N' Load* yet, which is shame – it would suit a pad and console gameplay down to the ground, and perhaps be a suitable vessel for younger gamers to cut their teeth on with first-person shooters after playing only *Minecraft* (a more suitable lesson than the '18+' alternatives, at least). *Block 'N' Load* seems to be what the *Red Faction* games wanted to be – the ultimate destructible environment laced with pure danger – but was perhaps too ambitious to achieve. Jagex doesn't have that problem – it knows the dialled-down retro stylings of *Minecraft* is *in* right now, and seems to have made a game that aims to capitalise on that firmly in its sights. That's not necessarily a bad thing.

> "Teams will need a good strategy and agile tactics to destroy the opposition's generator cubes in sequence, before finally taking down their base cube core"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, JAGEX



■ Below: There's something unsettling about how *Obra Dinn* presents itself – this skeleton feels more macabre for being rendered in the strange 1-bit method.



The Return of the Obra Dinn

CONCEPT ■ IN 1802, the merchant ship Obra Dinn set on a voyage from London to the Orient. Six months later, the ship drifts into dock after being declared lost at sea. You must figure out what happened.

Black Sails in the Sunset

Lucas Pope's first computing experience was with a Mac Plus – which came with its own native coding program: a simple script that allowed players to make sprites and interactive software, all rendered in 1-bit. The result is a lo-fi graphical experience presented in highly detailed monochrome, a style that's criminally underused in modern games development.

In a nostalgic effort to present another innovative product, Pope has taken on the challenge of making a 1-bit rendered game, but through a first-person perspective. The result is this an intriguing game that's going to have to rely on creating deep perspectives with binary colours to communicate texture, depth, light, direction and shadow, all in one. Pope admits he's set the bar quite high for himself, but his experience in the industry has allowed him to digest the product, one facet at a time. He's building the game in Unity, for example, moving away from the Haxe/OpenFL engine that *Papers, Please* was constructed in. Pope warns that 1-bit processing doesn't scale well and isn't captured well on video, so if you're not overly impressed by the quality of screens on this page, don't worry: it looks a *lot* prettier on the screen.

■ We can't think of another game that uses the old black-and-white Mac visuals in a first-person game. We can't wait to see what else Pope will think to do.

The story of *Obra Dinn* is a little less politically involved than its spiritual predecessor, though it seems like the mystery of the returning merchant ship will be no less unsettling. You play as an insurance broker on behalf of the East India Company, tasked with exploring the ship after it docks six months after being declared lost at sea. There are no crew on board, and the game seems to feature no life, other than that of the protagonist. It uses the sharp and empty 1-bit processing technique to its advantage: creating an alarming and captivating scene in a very gothic, isolationist setting.

Pope promises there'll be a gameplay hook that will set *Obra Dinn* apart from other puzzle games out there – it won't just revolve around item-collecting, area-observing paradigm most other mystery games are based on (though Pope refuses to release the hook until later in development). There's an extremely early build of the game up on Pope's website, though it doesn't feature any save states and is scarce in terms of content, it's a proof of concept of what you can expect from the indie scene's newest innovative game.

"I'd like to capture the detailed black and white look of old Mac games in a real-time 1st person game"

LUCAS POPE, DESIGNER, THE RETURN OF OBRA DINN

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac
Origin: USA
Publisher: Paradox Interactive
Developer: Obsidian Entertainment
Release: Q4 2014
Genre: RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Lucas Pope started his development career in the Nineties, working for a small team called Ratloop – partnered with Activision. He then moved on to the *Uncharted* games, before leaving the esteemed publisher to go back to the small games that he knew and loved. Pope released *Papers, Please* last year to critical acclaim.

Developer History

Malice
PC, Mac, Linux [1997]
Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
PS3 [2009]
Papers, Please
PC, Mac, Linux [2013]

High Point

Papers, Please was a clunky, UI-heavy border-patrol simulator that put players in the awkward shoes of immigration control workers, choosing whether or not to allow people passage into a fictional country. Self-aware and satisfying, the game offered something truly new.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

XEODRIFTER

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Renegade Kid
ETA: Q4 2014



DUE FOR release any day now, Renegade Kid's newest side-scrolling 2D platformer is a pixel-art masterpiece that promises to give anyone that isn't completely awake and focused the worst migraine of all time (if the 3D is turned up to its fullest). We say that as a good thing: the game's colourful palette will make the 3DS screen come alive, and the frenetic action as you're hopping around will be supported by a cast of odd yet familiar creatures.

SILENCE: THE WHISPERED WORLD 2

Format: PC
Publisher: Daedelic
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q1 2015



IMAGINE A world made of dreams, and how difficult that would be to create in a game. Daedelic managed it with *Silence*, and the follow-up to the point-and-click professional's adventure game promises to further the concept of a world made of incongruent matter with refreshed 3D graphics and a storyline about sibling loyalty and loss. *Silence 2* – if anything like the prequel – will be composed mostly of puzzles and environmental storytelling.

SKYFORGE

Format: PC
Publisher: My.com
Developer: Allods Team
ETA: December 2014



FOR A game that's been in development since 2010, we're surprised how little there is of *Skyforge* around – the game's an MMO that sees the player take on an immortal being, in a quest to become a God. Levelling up is done via an amalgamated figure based on all the character's stats, rather than a standard experience system. This means there's a mobility between classes that a lot of other games don't have.

NEVERMIND

Format: PC, Mac, Xbox One
Publisher: Flying Mollusk
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



NEVERMIND IS a horror game that uses biofeedback to make the horror experience more tailored to you: by using Kinect or various sensors available to PCs and Macs, *Nevermind* intends to transport you to 'the dark and twisted minds of psychological trauma victims' and have you explore the surreal labyrinths of the mind as you solve puzzles. The more your heartbeat picks up, the more frantic and difficult the game will become.

THIS WAR OF MINE

Format: PC, Mac, Linux
Publisher: 11-Bit Studios
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



THERE ARE many, many games about war. Few games take the time to step back and observe the shadow war casts – *Valiant Hearts* did it well, but it's a rare sample. *This War Of Mine* takes care to deconstruct the premise of war, having you play as a civilian in a war-torn city, rather than a soldier, having to venture out at night to avoid the rain of sniper bullets from entrenched opposing forces.

EITR

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Wii U
Publisher: Area effect
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



EITR IS a black poisonous substance in Norse mythology that worms its way into the life-tree Yggdrasil and poison it and the worlds it's connected to. In *Eitr*, your job is to prevent this poison from spreading further and creating more demons (mostly based in Norse lore). With a pixel-art style reminiscent of *Hyper Light Drifter*, and a *Dark Souls* stamina mechanic, Eitr could well be greater than the sum of its parts.

LYNN AND THE SPIRITS OF INAO

Format: PC
Publisher: Bloomylight Studio
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



IF NI NO KUNI was *Studio Ghibli: The Game*, then *Lynn And The Spirits Of Inao* is the unofficial sequel. Inspired by the artwork and stellar world-building of Hayao Miyazaki, the 2D platformer looks like a cross between *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, set in a mystical Japanese landscape besieged by once friendly spirits that you're tasked with coercing back to the side of righteousness.

THE SWINDLE

Format: PC
Publisher: Size Five
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



THE SWINDLE is basically *Spelunky* meets *Deus Ex* – a game about infiltrating buildings, hacking security, robbing people *blind* and getting away without anyone noticing. The procedurally-generated levels allow you to utilise all sorts of environmental miscellany to outsmart your opponents: guards that can be knocked out when you collapse rooms or break windows on their heads. GOTY, right?



CANCELLED – Prey 2 (PC)

Rumoured to have been in and out of development since 2006, *Prey 2* has had a troubled life, but was last month confirmed cancelled by Bethesda – a shame since a modern follow up could have subverted so much of what we know of the FPS.



DELAYED – The Crew (Multi)

Another Ubisoft game, another delay. It probably makes sense for the publisher to push back *The Crew*, though; it avoids the crammed racing game Q4 of 2014 that could have harmed its sales.

DUNGEONS II

Format: PC
Publisher: Kalypso Media
Developer: Realmforge Studios
ETA: Q1 2015



DUNGEONS 2 is the *Dungeon Keeper* remake we've all been waiting for (hang your heads in shame, EA mobile developers). Forget everything you know about the first *Dungeons* game – if you played it, that is – the sequel keeps only the humour and the 'feel' of the title. The interface is slicker; the overworld/underworld dynamic acts as an RTS vs. resource management game mechanic and the whole thing looks splendid.

CROOKZ

Format: PS4
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



IT MIGHT look like *The Sims*, but *Crookz* couldn't be further away from Maxis' life-simulator. Instead, the absurdly titled game focuses on a group of thieves infiltrating complexes to complete heist targets. In and of itself that sounds kinda dull, right? But the Seventies noir twist that touches on everything from graphics to music to style in *Crookz* saves it from mundanity. Also, the announcement trailer features 'classic' porn star Ron Jeremy. So… yeah.

VANE

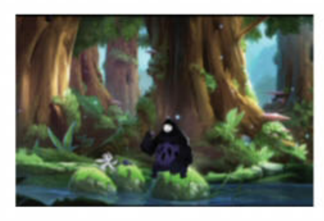
Format: PC
Publisher: Friend & Foe
Developer: In-House
ETA: 21 November 2014



IF YOU'VE been hanging around your PlayStation consoles looking sad, constantly refreshing your various news feeds for *any* information on *The Last Guardian*, we understand – we do it too. But fear not; *Vane* is being made by staff that have worked on the game, as well as *Battlefield 3*, *Bionic Commando* and *Killzone* – *Friend & Foe* is aiming to bring *Shadow Of The Colossus* and *Ico*'s mystery and exploration aspects to *Vane*.

ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

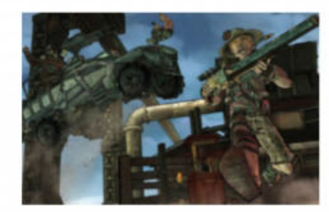
Format: PC
Publisher: Microsoft Studios
Developer: Moon Studios
ETA: Q4 2014



IN DEVELOPMENT for four years, *Ori And The Blind Forest* was acquired by Microsoft as an exclusive once the publisher caught wind of its existence only a year after its inception. The game has practically managed to recreate the UbiArt Framework in Unity – everything looks hand-drawn and beautiful. Moon Studio claims the game is a love letter to the likes of *Metroid* and *Rayman*, and you can really tell that that's the case.

TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

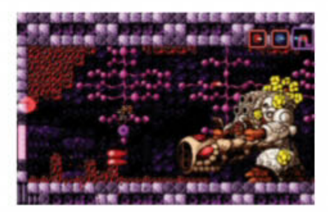
Format: PC, Vita, Wii U, Xbox One, PS4
Publisher: Telltale Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2014



TAKING PLACE after the end of *Borderlands 2*, *Tales* will control two different protagonists – the con artist Fiona and a data miner named Rhys. The two stories are separate to start with, but knowing Telltale, the decisions you make in one side will undoubtedly affect what's going on with the other character. Interestingly, loot you acquire in *Tales* will be available to use elsewhere in the *Borderlands* universe.

AXIOM VERGE

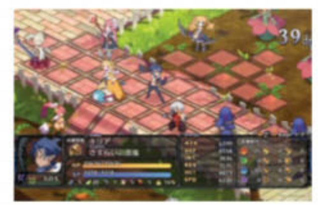
Format: Pc, Vita, PS4
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Tom Happ
ETA: 2015



A GAME made by one person is always interesting; it's a pure representation of who they are. Tom Happ has composed the OST for *Axiom Verge*, as well as developing all the art and programming all the gameplay. The game's art style and overall feel is inspired by *Bionic Commander*, *Blaster Master*, *Contra* and others opertating in the genre, although it takes the idea in a much darker direction.

DISGAEA 5

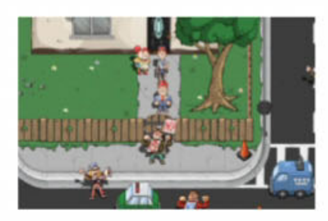
Format: PS4
Publisher: Nippon Ichi Software
Developer: In-house
ETA: 26 March, 2015 (Japan)



IN DISGAEA 5, you'll play as Killia – the young protagonist who seeks vengeance after the demon emperor Void Dark destroyed his hometown. Teaming up with Seraphine – an Angel Princess determined to fight The Lost – and a Rabbit Princess riding a yellow Prinny, *Disgaea 5* can render up to 100 enemies on-screen at a time, meaning Japan's craziest RPG is going to get a whole lot crazier.

CITIZENS OF EARTH

Format: Vita, 3DS, PC, Wii U
Publisher: Atlus
Developer: Eden Industries
ETA: 2015

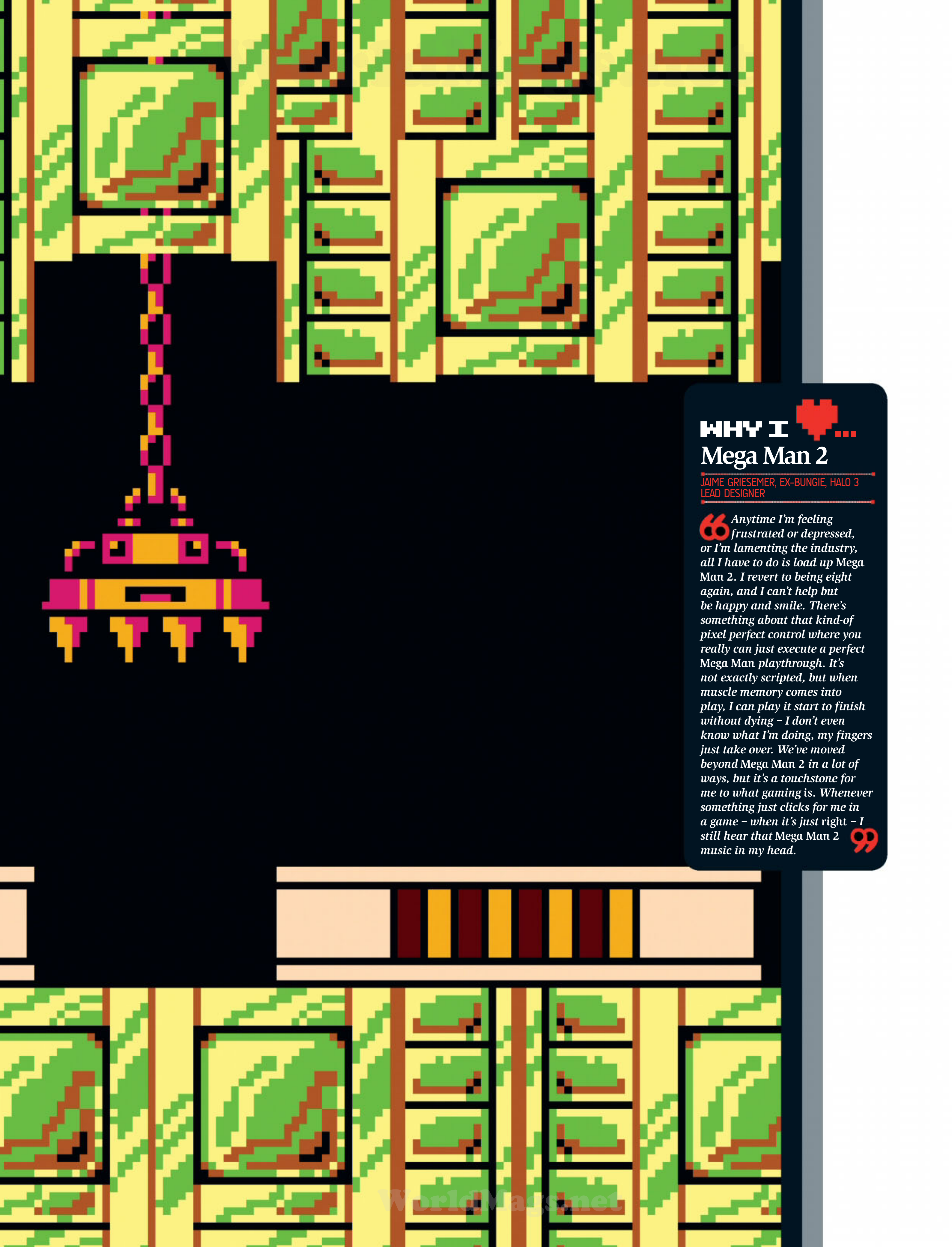


TIRED OF fighting with warriors, mages, samurais and healers? Don't worry – *Citizens Of Earth* flies in the face of the conventional RPG and lets you play as the more overlooked characters in fantasy gaming. Classes include Baker, Barista, School Teacher, Homeless Guy and a wealth of other down-to-earth heroes that are given unique and interesting abilities with which to save their hometowns.



"When muscle memory comes into play, I can play Mega Man 2 start to finish without dying"

JAIME GRIESEMER, EX-BUNGIE, HALO 3 LEAD DESIGNER



WHY I ♥...

Mega Man 2

JAIME GRIESEMER, EX-BUNGIE, HALO 3 LEAD DESIGNER

“Anytime I’m feeling frustrated or depressed, or I’m lamenting the industry, all I have to do is load up Mega Man 2. I revert to being eight again, and I can’t help but be happy and smile. There’s something about that kind-of pixel perfect control where you really can just execute a perfect Mega Man playthrough. It’s not exactly scripted, but when muscle memory comes into play, I can play it start to finish without dying – I don’t even know what I’m doing, my fingers just take over. We’ve moved beyond Mega Man 2 in a lot of ways, but it’s a touchstone for me to what gaming is. Whenever something just clicks for me in a game – when it’s just right – I still hear that Mega Man 2 music in my head.”



OF MONSTERS AND MEN



LAST GENERATION, TURTLE ROCK TURNED MULTIPLAYER CO-OP ON ITS HEAD WITH A GAME CALLED LEFT 4 DEAD THAT INTRODUCED AN IDEA NEW TO GAMING: THE AI DIRECTOR. IT WAS LIKE PLAYING AGAINST ANOTHER PERSON – A KILLER THAT SHARED A MIMETIC LINK WITH YOUR ENEMIES AND SENT THEM TO TRACK YOU DOWN. FOR THE GUYS AT TURTLE ROCK THAT WASN'T ENOUGH. THEY WANTED TO PLAY AS THE MONSTER, SO THEY CREATED EVOLVE...

Counter-Strike, *Half-Life 2*, *Left 4 Dead* and *Left 4 Dead 2*. That's an impressive portfolio, one that oozes quality and innovation. That's an overused word in this industry – it's easy to slap 'innovation' on any product and roll with it – but each of Turtle Rock's previous games has done something new, something special. *Counter-Strike* defined the PC FPS and continued to thrive for well over a decade, *Half-Life 2* set a benchmark for how developers should marry mechanics and narrative, and *Left 4 Dead*... well, *Left 4 Dead* proved what you could achieve with four-player co-op in this day in age.

Turtle Rock could have rested on its laurels, cashed in with *Left 4 Dead 3* – reinventing nothing but its own ideas. That would have been easy, and obvious. Instead, the studio moved out from under Valve's creative custody and set foot into the wilderness, and this absurd idea of a 4v1 multiplayer-only action game was snapped up by THQ (who acquired the rights to *Evolve* in May 2011).

It was a gamble – this kind of game wasn't popular, and triple-A publishers are famously conservative when it comes to untrialled, untested ideas. But the canny developers at Turtle Rock argued that this concept they had in mind would effectively make a game out of 'the Tank vs. the survivors in *Left 4 Dead*' and, suddenly, everyone was convinced.

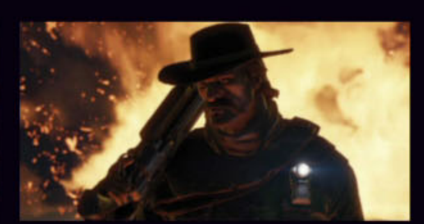
A few months later, THQ collapsed. A feeding frenzy in December 2012 resulted in 2K Games picking up the IP for $10.8 million The game was formally announced in February 2014 – having been in development for three years by this point – and seemed to spark a flurry of announcements from other developers who outlined similar mechanics in their own games: suddenly, 4v1 wasn't just *Evolve*'s domain – it was everyone's.

"When we came up with this idea, the idea of asymmetric multiplayer, we just thought 'What is it we'd like to play?' and 'Why is nobody making it yet?'," reveals Turtle Rock's creative director and co-founder, Phil Robb. "Who knows why other studios are doing it now, it might be serendipity or something, but it's hard to say. For us, it has nothing to do with the new hardware – we just saw it as a natural progression from what we were doing with *Left 4 Dead* but with wanting to bring in that element of competitiveness that our last games didn't have." Robb pauses for a second, as if to contemplate his answer, before continuing. "You're probably after some big philosophical answer as to why we're doing 4v1, but, y'know, really, it's as simple as that. We just wanted to play it!"

The trouble with working to a philosophy that boils down to 'Make the games you want to play' is that the games you want to play might not have been made before. There are very few points of reference for »







■ We're kind-of sick of gloomy, low-lit levels in games... but *Evolve* somehow rises above the others; between a magnificent lighting engine, fire effects illuminating the imposing world and eldritch alien fauna, it's one of the more complete FPS worlds we've seen.

> **WITH EVOLVE, WE GOT IT FUNCTIONAL IN ABOUT FOUR MONTHS, AND WE'VE BEEN PLAYING IT PRETTY MUCH EVERY NIGHT SINCE**



» asymmetrical multiplayer games – it's a new genre, experimenting with new mechanics, relying on players to know exactly what they're doing in order to make the player/game relationship an enjoyable and fair one. So how do you go about balancing a new game like that and making sure it'll be a fair experience for everyone on release?

"For us, it's rigorous playtesting and then looking at telemetry numbers: that's really all we can do," explains Robb. "We playtest every night in the studio and do everything we can to get the game into the hands of the public. That gives us the best information – we have our own internal playtests which we can gather our own specific information from, and then when it's out in the wild we can get different kinds of player data. We look at those impressions and look at our numbers."

Turtle Rock and publisher 2K Games have been taking an early build of the game to various industry shows and inviting people into their respective offices to get an early



■ The Trapper class is the most integral part of the Hunter team – they're responsible for drawing the Monster out, and keeping it on the radar, too.





Balancing the Monster with a team of four players wasn't easy, and took Turtle Rock most of the development process to get right.

ALPHA AND OMEGA

Evolve's 'Big Alpha' wasn't the resounding success the developer and its fanbase wanted it to be… in fact it was plagued with errors. Undermined by the PlayStation 4's 2.0 update, and hounded with a slew of server errors, the Alpha *did* teach Turtle Rock a few things the studio was better learning now than on launch day… "What we wanted to get from the alpha was to stress-test our servers," explains Robb. "We wanted to start matchmaking and we found that – hey, hang on, our matchmaking is broken, it isn't working the way we intended it to. You'd get higher levelled players matched with people at level one and level two and they could just go and orchestrate this 'stage one wipe', as they were calling it. Then the whole thing with the [PS4 2.0 issue] was a shame, too. But I'd rather all that happen in the alpha – these are huge learning curves for us, and we encountered problems here I'd *hate* to have encountered on Day One. We're looking at all the data we can get from the alpha and taking action where we can."

look at the game – the purpose of doing so goes further than just whetting the public appetite for the team's newest blockbuster: it also allows Turtle Rock to monitor how other people play. A team of developers hitting the death-match every night is going to look wildly different to your average gamer and their buddies going toe-to-toe, and Turtle Rock requires a diverse slate of opinion and data to accurately balance and fine-tune its product.

"A real popular [bit of feedback we had from the Big Alpha] is 'Lazarus is over-powered!' – we get that a lot on our forums," reveals Robb. "We think 'Okay, that's perfectly fine, let's dig into that a bit'. But then we realise he's fine – our telemetry states that he's not imparting any numerical advantages over any of the other medics you can choose (well, at least not in the way people are playing him *right now*). That's how we do things, we get the game up and running as quickly as possible – with *Evolve*, we got it functional in about four months, and we've been playing it pretty much every night since."

The balancing results in a game that – we hope – will come to define the asymmetric multiplayer experience. It takes a lot of craft to get there – the four classes in *Evolve* aren't just random choices; balancing each of their respective strengths and weaknesses has been a huge part of the development process, bearing in mind there's only *one* enemy for the players to work against, including three variations on each of the main classes must have been a challenging goal…

"So we got four classes – Assault, Trapper, Medic and Support," Robb explains. "The Assault guys are there to do damage – they're the most simple: all you've got to do is get in and kick ass." So far, so simple – but then every FPS game needs the damage-dealing core – the soldier that can inflict the most damage-per-second without pause – Hyde, for example, is equipped with a flame-thrower, whilst Markov wields an assault rifle. Both have the ability to defend their allies with a personal shield, too.

"The Medic is another straightforward class, though our Medics are probably a bit more complex than Medics in traditional games," Rob continues, "they're there to keep everyone in the fight, but they can also buff." The different Medic characters also have wildly differential abilities, depending on who you choose: Lazarus, for example, revives downed allies, whereas Val operates more like Team Fortress' Medic.

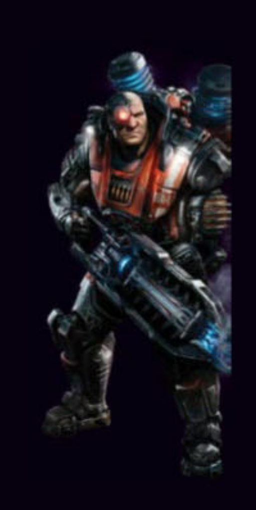
"The Trappers are there to find the Monster, and then – once they find it – are equipped with tools that can inhibit it in some way," Robb explains. "Griffin and Maggie both have harpoons, so Griffin is more hands-on and skill-based, whereas Maggie has to anticipate the Monster – but doesn't have to aim." It all comes down to personal play-style and preference: if you prefer to be uber-precise and like your twitch-based gaming (so, if you play a lot of *Call Of Duty*, for example) you'll be confident with Griffin – if you're happier to draw aggro and play the longer game, Maggie's more your style.

"Then there's Support," Robb concludes, "Support is the glue that holds the Hunters together, they're there to complement the team, helping the teammates do their jobs better." Think 'engineers' from typical class-based games.

Throughout our conversation with Robb, we noticed how he kept peppering his responses to our questions with little anecdotes from the game – mentioning how, one time, he was drawing aggro from the monster as an Assault so the Trapper could set up this complex tactic, or how – this other time – he »



The Medic won't just keep you alive, they can also deal a decent amount of damage to the Monster, too – as long as they keep their eye on their allies' health



CLASH OF THE TITANS

One of the core tenets of *Evolve*'s design relies on players adapting their techniques; depending on which Monster they come up against. At the time of writing, only two have been formally announced – the Goliath and the Kraken – with a third confirmed playable at launch (we're hoping for some kind of arachnid…) With that in mind, we asked Robb how he saw players reacting to the Kraken after adapted to defending themselves from a Goliath onslaught…

"It was interesting to see the Hunter teams try and use the same tactics to take out the Kraken, after they spent so long fighting the Goliath. We were testing our progression system during the Alpha, so people got to see a lot more of the Goliath to begin with before they'd encounter Kraken players. As people are wont to do, the second they get something new thrown at them and they get their butts kicked they scream 'Overpowered!' but one of the things that hints at *Evolve*'s longevity is that you're going to be faced with new things, and you might get your butt kicked, but you have to adapt to the challenge at hand. The fun of the game lies in figuring out that puzzle."



■ The character designs in *Evolve* are exactly what you'd expect from Turtle Rock: like *Left 4 Dead*, they're well-constructed but subtle.

» and his team were blindsided by a Kraken that swooped down and routed them. "Studios that don't play their own games are at a huge disadvantage," opines Robb. "Numbers and telemetry alone are not enough, you need to play your game to try and figure out that elusive quality that you just can't gather through the math. The numbers can all add up, but if the game's not fun then what's the point?"

That quality is incredibly hard to define – after all, the concept of 'fun' in a videogame varies fundamentally from person-to-person – but for many gamers, *Left 4 Dead* managed to hit on that delicate middle-point between emergent storytelling and completely random action, mostly thanks to the AI Director engine. One of our favourite moments from that game was when we found ourselves re-united with our colleagues in a quiet zone, our leader lecturing us about the importance of sticking together as we reloaded, healed and prepped. His pep talk was just about to come to an end. "Remember, we all need to stay close and –" He was cut off as a Smoker's tongue wrenched him through a window."We didn't consciously set out to create



> THE WAY THE GAME'S STRUCTURED MEANS YOU CAN END UP WITH THESE CRAZY HAIL MARY PASSES IN THE FINAL SECONDS

those emergent moments in *Left 4 Dead*," Robb explains in response to our story, "but *Evolve* certainly has that same power to let crazy, amazing things happen. I've seen the game played for over three years, and even now we'll get people [in the office to playtest] and we'll all be like 'These guys are so bad, they're gonna die!' But then they turn it around, and sneak out a win, and we can't plan that!"

It's a type of gameplay that we adore, because it requires no script, no planning, no real commitment to any sort of narrative beat. In a game like *Evolve* where story and world-building really are secondary to gameplay, these almost random moments give the player something more to invest in – it gives them their own story to tell, their own anecdote to relate back to friends or co-workers in the light of day.

"Those water-cooler moments just sort of happen in *Evolve*. It's natural to the game. That kind of ebb and flow nature to the battle means you can't have a guaranteed steamroll win or lose – just because you're doing well to begin with doesn't mean you'll keep that for the whole game. The way the game's structured means you can end up with these crazy Hail Mary passes in the final seconds of a round where we're all shouting at the screen like 'Holy Shit! I can't believe they've done that!'"

■ Caira is the new Medic joining *Evolve* and she's far more attacking in style than most – flying in the face of the conventional 'White Mage' medic.



Creating those emergent experiences is important, vital, in a triple-A game that doesn't feature much in the way of a traditional videogame narrative, but if we're going to believe in a world like this, it has to tell its story somehow. Like the *Left 4 Dead* games that came before it, *Evolve*'s world and characters impart all the narrative content relevant to the game – cutscenes, 'story missions' and exposition dumps are anathema here.

"For Turtle Rock, we look at the industry and see a lot of developers that can make great narrative games," explains Robb, "but our thing is multiplayer, our thing is giving people new experiences. Turtle Rock games are more gameplay-driven than anything else... y'know, it's funny: I've heard people give games pitches where all they'll talk about is the story, right? All I think then is that you could easily take this and then make a movie, or write a book. What I want to know »

is how it plays, what you're doing with gameplay. For us, the story is the wrapper that makes the gameplay make sense."

Robb continues, citing the lessons learned throughout the studio's tenure on *Left 4 Dead* as the motivating force behind dropping the forced narrative element altogether (something we believe would benefit a lot of studios crowbarring haggard stories into their action games right now). "The way we did it in *Left 4 Dead* was we made the characters talk – and we've done that a lot more in *Evolve*. During lulls in the action or during sequences in the drop ship, they'll just talk. They'll talk about things that are happening in the world, or they'll talk about each other – what we're doing is giving you snippets of story that you can put together like puzzle pieces. We don't hold your hand in a linear fashion – we're not trying to lead you down a storybook road. Other games do that really well, but that isn't for us. As you play, if you're paying attention, you'll pick up little things and can put it together. A lot of people get into a game and they don't give a shit about story – they just want to load up, get in, fight monsters and go crazy – but for the people who are interested, they can listen, and pick out what they want."

Turtle Rock is all about offering new experiences in gameplay, but it seems the studio is also offering that mentality to the more traditional side of things, too: in an industry where the majority of games want to ram their stories down your throat with vapid characters and unskippable cutscenes (*Assassin's Creed*, *Sunset Overdrive* and even multiplayer stablemate *Destiny*), *Evolve* understands its target audience – they want to shoot, to play, to win.

"There have been a lot of games that have come out that are multiplayer-lead that have peacocked around and boasted 'Hey, we've got this new innovative way of telling stories'. We're... we're more honest than that, we want to set the expectations right away – we're not selling you a novel, we're not selling you a movie, we're selling you an experience."

Throughout our time with Robb, we noticed he kept saying that – reiterating that *Evolve* was an experience. Looking back to *Left 4 Dead*, it's easy to see why this is the language Robb fixates on – there was nothing really like *Left 4 Dead* at the time of launch, and there's nothing really like *Evolve* knocking around right now. His game will be an experience – that much we're sure of – we just hope it paves the way for an arrangement of other studios taking this brave new genre in other directions once they realise it's a viable area of the gaming market.

"When one studio does something, and it gains traction, it shows everyone else that that's doable – I think it's really cool," concludes Robb. "It's always great to have something new in gaming because things tend to get kinda stagnant. We set out to do 4-on-1 because, if nothing else, we just wanted to do something new."

■ A vast array of weapons compounded with a more-intricate-than-you'd-think class system prevents *Evolve* from getting predictable.

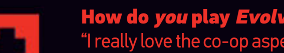


> WE'RE NOT SELLING YOU A NOVEL, WE'RE NOT SELLING YOU A MOVIE, WE'RE SELLING YOU AN EXPERIENCE



UNLEASHING THE MONSTER WITHIN

Phil Robb, Turtle Rock's creative director tells us how he plays Evolve



How do *you* play *Evolve*?
"I really love the co-op aspect of *Evolve*. Co-op's always been my *thing*, so my favourite moments are just when everyone in the game is communicating and things are just happening *nicely*: the team's working well together, and you see the success that's bringing... I love that. Whenever we've been backed into a corner and we're all down and the person who took Maggie means we get saved by Daisy... [laughter] Those are really great moments. When that co-op element clicks, it's perfect."

Ever play as the Monster?
"The monster's definitely a cool thing to play but I'm 44 now and my reflexes aren't what they used to be. I like being a member of a team where we can each compensate for each other's weaknesses."

Is there anyone in the studio that's a real sadist...?
We've got quite a few guys in the office that just want to be the Monster, all the time. They don't want to rely on a team – they want all the glory for themselves. There's a few people in the office I don't even want to play against, they're real mean, like – they *love* playing as the Monster.





HUNTERS






ASSAULT



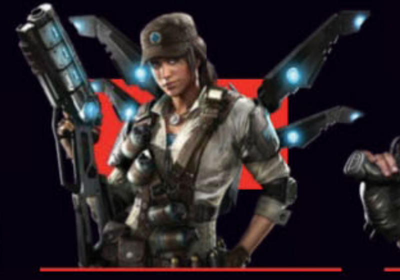
PARNELL

With his trusty rocket launcher, Parnell is probably the most explosive of the Assault characters. While Markov and Hyde are all about getting up close and dealing masses of damage, Parnell can play at a little more distance and draw the monster out.



MARKOV HYDE

MEDIC



CAIRA

Probably the most offensively designed of all the Medics, Caira is a grenade master. Her dual-mode launcher can fire healing grenades with a wide splash impact radius or napalm to really mess the monster up. Perfect for players who want to get into the fight.



VAL LAZARUS

TRAPPER



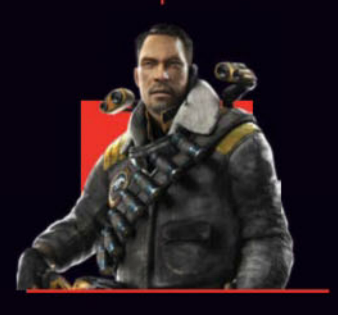
ABE

More of a distance player, Abe is perfect for strategists and with this Stasis Grenade a far more effective tool for containing the monster when he's used correctly. He's not great on offense, but with a strong attacking team he's the perfect complement.



GRIFFIN MAGGIE

SUPPORT



CABOT

As with the other Support characters Cabot is here to bolster the abilities of those already in the team. In his case it's in tracking the monster with a radioactive dust cloud that makes your prey visible at all times. Of course you actually have to find the thing first.



HANK BUCKET



VS

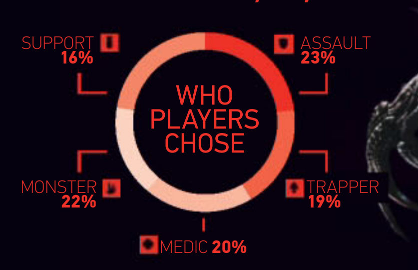
MONSTERS

GOLIATH

For the solo player who likes to smash heads together, the Goliath is the Jason Bourne of the monster world, dealing hand-to-hand death to hunters who get in its way. While lower evolutions may struggle to survive, the fully evolved beast is a terror few can stand against.

BIG ALPHA STATS

MONSTER WINS: **574,079**
HUNTERS WINS: **753,414**
ROUNDS PLAYED: **1,327,493**





KRAKEN

The Kraken is for the confident lone wolf who's happy to toy with the hunters. The ability to fly and fire projectiles means you can work from a distance, sniping and running away to cause confusion. But get caught and you may not last long.

gamesTM 2014 BUYER'S GUIDE

2014 HAS BEEN A STRONG YEAR FOR GAMERS – BETWEEN THE RISE OF THE NEW GENERATION OF CONSOLE HARDWARE AND DEVELOPERS' CONTINUED SUPPORT FOR THE PS3 AND 360, COMPOUNDED WITH THE INDIE SCENE MOVING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH AND THE RESILIENT SUCCESS OF THE HANDHELD DEVICE, WE'VE BEEN UTTERLY SPOILT FOR CHOICE (EVEN DURING THE INFAMOUS 'SUMMER DROUGHT'). NOW, AS CHRISTMAS APPROACHES, **GAMESTM** LOOKS BACK ON THE YEAR IN RETAIL AND PRESENTS TO A LIST OF OUR ESSENTIAL PURCHASES IN TIME FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON…



PS4

RRP £349.99



At the time of writing, Sony published that it has sold 13.5 million PS4 units globally – the driving force behind the entertainment giant's overall 7.2% revenue spike. With PS Now on the horizon and PS+ continuing to be the most impressive gaming service (after Steam), you can be sure the PS4 will continue to dominate in 2015

MUST-BUY GAMES



DRIVECLUB

■ Bringing social racing at its finest, *DriveClub* mixes amazingly realistic visuals with tight handling, intuitive matchmaking and competitive modes that are as satisfying as its co-operative modes.

PS4's best racing game



INFAMOUS: SECOND SON

■ Like a superhero game without a licence, *Second Son* was the first action-adventure on the console to show us how powerful the hardware is.

You could play it for Photo Mode alone



KILLZONE: SHADOW FALL

■ Every console exclusive line-up needs an FPS, and *Killzone* has been doing it for Sony since the PlayStation 2. It helps that *Shadow Fall* is one of the better-looking PS4 exclusives.

Realistic, responsive gunplay



THE LAST OF US: REMASTERED

■ Naughty Dog's magnum opus didn't really need the PS4 upscale – it looked great as it did – but the slight additions in terms of difficulty modes and photo mode make it essential

The best game of 2013



LITTLEBIGPLANET 3

■ The most family-friendly title in the PS4 exclusives, Sumo Digital's take on Media Molecule's franchise is inventive enough to be fresh, without ruining what made the originals so great.

Appealing to everyone

ESSENTIAL DOWNLOADS



TRANSISTOR

■ From the team behind *Bastion*, *Transistor* plays with narrative tricks and intriguing combat mechanics for a final product that's as playable as it is intelligent.

Short, sharp and sure to make you think



SPELUNKY

■ With all the simplicity of a retro game and all the mechanical and graphical polish of a modern triple-A release, *Spelunky* is an equally enjoyable experience either on your own or with a friend.

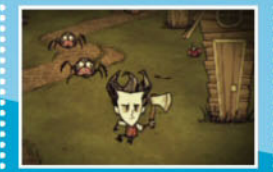
So difficult to put down



OLLIOLLI

■ If *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* met *Super Meat Boy*, it'd have had a child named Olli that was *so bloody good* they'd have had to name it twice. We still can't play this enough.

Hardcore, finger-shredding 2D action



DON'T STARVE

■ Leading the charge in the new indie vogue for survival-adventure games, *Don't Starve* feels like a *Zelda* game made by Henry Selick and Tim Burton. Watch people play it on Twitch for endless fun.

Survival action at its purest



BINDING OF ISAAC: REBIRTH

■ Dark, strange, sad and scary – the remake of Nicalis' *The Binding of Isaac* features more bosses, levels and secrets than its predecessor (and is also brutally gory).

Not for the faint of heart

KILLER ACCESSORIES



PLAYSTATION TV

■ The best thing about the Vita is its portability, but if you ever want to sit down and play Vita games with a real pad, or see them on the big screen, the PlayStation TV will sort you out.

RRP: £84.99



PS4 HEADPHONES

■ The official PlayStation headsets feature in-built settings, optimised for all major PS4 releases, including multi-platform games like *Destiny*, *COD* and *Battlefield*.

RRP: £76.99

BONUS



JAK & DAXTER STATUE

■ Being a Sony fan automatically means you're a Naughty Dog devotee, so why not show off your loyalty with a 1-in-750 *Jak & Daxter* statue? **RRP: $190.00**

XBOX ONE

The Xbox One is a true underdog – managing to undermine the stellar work Microsoft established with the Xbox 360. Still, the Xbox One isn't doing badly, and after stumbling out the gates, a renewed ID@Xbox programme and Halo 5's impending release might allow this underdog to bite back.

RRP £329.99



MUST-BUY GAMES

EDITOR'S PICK



FORZA HORIZON 2

■ Taking the sim-heavy formula of Forza's gameplay and making it more accessible, Horizon 2 celebrates the 'festivals' of driving: focusing on music, open roads and *proper* racing.

An open-world playground.



HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

■ A mascot that needs no introduction, Chief's HD rebirth on the Xbox One made us hungrier for another sliver of *Halo 5* news.

Finish the fight again. It's worth it



TITANFALL

■ Respawn took all the lessons its staff learnt from *Call Of Duty* and took them to the extremes: if *Blade Runner* and *District 9* made a game together, it would be this.

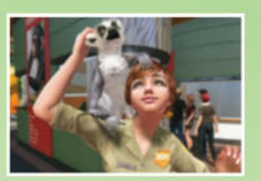
Call of Duty, via Michael Bay's Transformers



SUNSET OVERDRIVE

■ Insomniac's Xbox One debut is a far cry from *Spyro* or *Ratchet & Clank*, but the studio stuck to its guns and delivered a fun, frantic shooter that embraces Eighties/Nineties pop culture.

The Family Guy of shooters



ZOO TYCOON

■ A family friendly hit rounds off Microsoft's exclusive range: it might look simple, but the nuance and depth to *Zoo Tycoon* is genuinely and surprisingly impressive

The closest thing you'll get to owning a zoo

ESSENTIAL DOWNLOADS

EDITOR'S PICK



SUPER TIME FORCE

■ Xbox One's bullet-hell love letter, *Super Time Force* plays with how time works in a linear fashion as you replay levels with yourself. Sounds dull, plays like a dream.

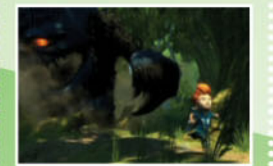
Deceptively complex – a modern Arcade gem



PROJECT SPARK

■ The Xbox's answer to *Minecraft* or *LittleBigPlanet* – you can do anything you like in *Project Spark*, including making your own game inside the game!

Gets those creative juices flowing



MAX: THE CURSE OF BROTHERHOOD

■ A 2.5D physics-based puzzler where you're presented with a variety of ways to tackle each problem. Lateral thinking and trial-and-error a must.

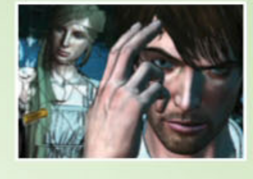
If Pixar made puzzlers



KILLER INSTINCT: SEASON 2

■ At the time of writing, this is the only fighting game we've got on current-gen consoles. That, in itself, makes *Killer Instinct* worth a go.

Accessible, entry-level fighting done well



D4: DARK DREAMS DON'T DIE

■ A Kinect-based detective mystery that's utterly bizarre: the time-travel mechanics will throw you back at first, but get easier to understand.

Best in show for Kinect

KILLER ACCESSORIES



XBOX ONE MEDIA REMOTE

■ The Xbox One isn't just a games console, it's a media hub: the Media Remote allows you to browse Netflix, music, OneGuide and TV apps easier than a pad does **RRP: £17.99**



KINECT 2.0

■ Despite Microsoft backtracking on its decision to ship every Xbox One console with a Kinect, there are a few games that use it to good effect.

RRP: £129.99

BONUS

HALO: MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION MJOLNIR EDITION



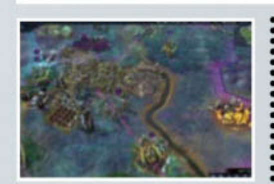
■ It ships with the most important tool for any Spartan: a flip calendar with maps and stats.

RRP: £52.99

PC

The master race has had a good year in 2014 – a ton of PC exclusive games have released alongside the usual bonus of Steam and its incredible sales. If we could, we'd just slap a Steam logo on this page and say 'Buy it all!'

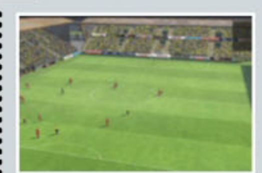
MUST-BUY GAMES



CIVILIZATION: BEYOND EARTH

■ The go-to name in RTS games – a franchise that has withstood the shifting ground the genre has been tentatively rested on.

Age Of Empires **in space. Essential playing**



FOOTBALL MANAGER 2015

■ The most in-depth/detailed RPG out there, and there's not a warrior or bard in sight (unless you count violent players and lyrical commentators)

Pitch-side advice-shouting simulator

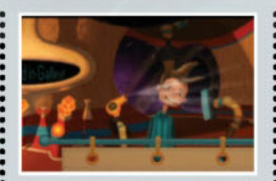
EDITOR'S PICK



WASTELAND 2

■ A sequel we waited over 20 years for didn't disappoint: the father of *Fallout*, the prodigal son of videogames. Difficult choices and unbearable consequences still reign supreme.

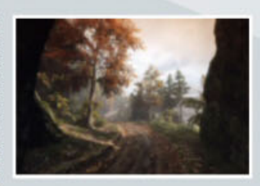
A triumphant return from the Eighties



BROKEN AGE

■ Tim Schafer's newest foray into point-and-click thankfully doesn't disappoint: it's one of the most genuinely funny games released, and worth picking up if you ever enjoyed *Monkey Island* or *Grim Fandango*.

High point in gaming comedy

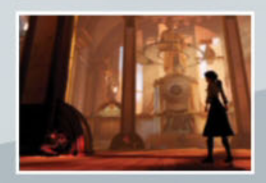


THE VANISHING OF ETHAN CARTER

■ The craftsmanship of the world created by The Astronauts is the main reason to play this game – it's a valuable lesson in art design and direction

One of the prettiest games released this year

STEAM PICKS



BIOSHOCK INFINITE

■ Ken Levine's peak, both in game design and narrative. Usually on offer for about £10 – if you haven't played this, you *must* pick it up. It's a fantastic step forward in story-telling.

Still one of the best games ever made

EDITOR'S PICK



SUPER MEAT BOY

■ Don't play this with a keyboard – it was meant for pads (you'd end up smashing your keyboard up anyway, without a doubt). An excellently brutal platformer, definitely one for the masochists.

'Just one more go' until 4am



THE STANLEY PARABLE

■ Self-effacing and meta to a fault, a game about games, telling a story about stories. Certainly worth playing through a few times.

An academic deconstruction of gaming



KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

■ Ever wanted to be a cosmic engineer? This is probably the closest you're ever going to get. It makes you want to prove that you get it.

Flight Simulator **in space. Difficult and addictive**



SKYRIM

■ *Skyrim*'s life is being artificially extended by a series of stupendous patches that can only be played via PC. Seriously, you don't know how much you need these in your life.

You can make dragons into Thomas the Tank Engine…

KILLER ACCESSORIES



RAZER NAGA HEX

■ We could have chosen any number of mice to throw in here, but the Naga has 6 thumb-buttons ideal for RPG/MOBA hotkeying

RRP £69.99



STEELSERIES APEX GAMING KEYBOARD

■ Serious keyboard warriors can program the Apex keyboard's 22 separate macro keys to whatever commands they want

RRP £79.99

BONUS

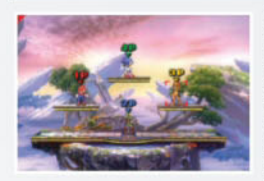


PC MASTER RACE T-SHIRT

■ Inspired by the Zero Punctuation animated reviews, this shirt declares your superiority over all other forms of gamer.

RRP £17.99

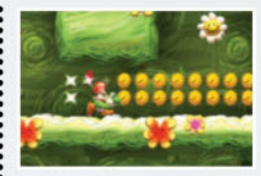
MUST-BUY GAMES



SUPER SMASH BROS. FOR 3DS

■ Not particularly suited to the tiny buttons of the 3DS, but a fantastic play nonetheless – makes good use of the 3DS native' wireless capability

The ultimate party game goes handheld



YOSHI'S NEW ISLAND

■ Somehow Nintendo manages to reinvent the platforming game to some degree every time it releases a new one – *New Island* just so happens to be the most recent of a long line of hits

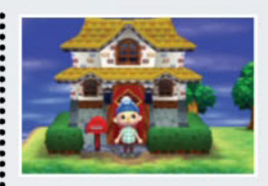
Traditional Nintendo platforming



POKÉMON OMEGA RUBY & ALPHA SAPPHIRE

■ Anyone that played the originals will be awed by the 3D ground-up remake, whilst hardcore players will ogle at the more intricate world.

10 years later – still a joy



ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW LEAF

■ Cutesy, compulsive and compelling – *New Leaf* won over thousands of new players to the animal-based social sim, and for good reason

A game that makes you a better person, morally



SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI IV

■ In keeping with the series, this JRPG is a philosophical tour through chaos and order, set in one of the most intriguing worlds the 3DS has seen

Like *Pokémon*, but with a penis monster in it



3DS

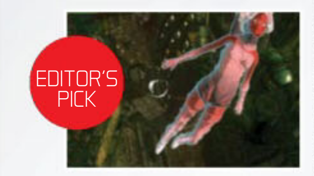
The 3DS family has a point of entry for everyone: the 2DS is perfect on a budget, the 'New' 3DS is great for action-lovers, and the vanilla model will cover everyone else



PS VITA

Remote Access, PS4 cross-play and PSN round out the best non-Nintendo console's eclectic range of exclusives

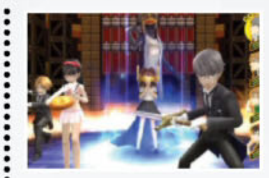
MUST-BUY GAMES



GRAVITY RUSH

■ One of the earliest PS Vita exclusives is still one of the best – an action-RPG that puts the touchscreens and gyroscopes built into the console to work like no other game.

Vita's 'proof-of-concept' masterpiece



PERSONA 4 GOLDEN

■ The PS2's best *Persona* game, re-made with the Vita in mind. A completionist's nightmare, it's the most well-realised JRPG the console has to offer.

High-School sim meets dungeon-crawling madness



FINAL FANTASY X-X2 HD REMASTER

■ With updated visuals, Square managed to make the duo of RPGs look like modern PS3 games. Stunning effort for flawless titles.

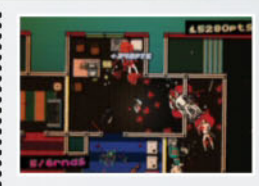
Best value RPG package on handheld



HOHOKUM

■ Inspired by oddball British comedy, *Hohokum* is an anti-game where you're a snake creature just exploring a strange world, but don't let that dissuade you: nothing else quite like it exists on the market today

'Mighty Boosh: The Game'



HOTLINE MIAMI

■ Released on PC, but very at home on the Vita, *Hotline Miami* is the most violent, most upsetting top-down pixel-art game in existence. And it's absolutely great.

Insanely playable, gloriously bloody

WII U

RRP £149.99



A thin release schedule and a dull start to the year made a lot of gamers doubt Nintendo's devotion to the Wii U, but then Mario Kart 8, Super Smash Bros. and Bayonetta swooped in to save the day. And there's still plenty more goodness to come…

MUST-BUY GAMES



BAYONETTA 2

■ Take a witch, give her mystical, magical hair, make her fight angels and throw in a whole heap of Nintendo fan-service. Add in some pretty damn excellent combat, and you've got yourself a system-seller.

The Wii U's best action game




MARIO KART 8

■ *Mario Kart* has somehow managed to keep local multiplayer fun (and alive) for over a decade, and it shows no sign of slowing down. It's the saviour of the Wii U, of that we have no doubt.

Will remain relevant forever

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. U

■ Nintendo is probably the best developer of platformers in the world, and despite numerous releases per year, consistently comes up with new ideas.

2D platforming for the modern gamer



THE WONDERFUL 101

■ Bizarre, eclectic, obscenely pretty and one of the most colourful action games out there, this is a Platinum game taken to its logical conclusion.

A wonderful insight into Kamiya's mind



SUPER SMASH BROS.

■ No game does brawling better. When held up against the likes of *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale*, it's evident just how well Nintendo knows this genre

The best party game on the market

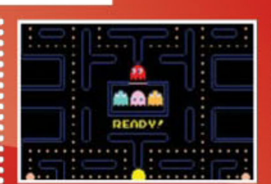
ESSENTIAL DOWNLOADS



NINJA GAIDEN

■ The beginning of this infamously difficult series was no more forgiving than its sequels and spin-offs, giving Ryu Hayabusa the start in life that would come to define the series as a whole.

Castlevania, but with ninjas



PAC-MAN

■ Perhaps gaming's most iconic pill-popping, ghost-chasing circle-based game, *Pac-Man* still offers a fantastically addictive gaming experience, despite – or perhaps because of – its simplicity.

You'll be a-maze-d (sorry)

EDITOR'S PICK



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

■ The forerunner of the modern RPG, every gamer owes it to themselves to play it. A wonderful world with even better mechanics, it's worth returning to it to see where it all began.

It changed games forever



GHOSTS 'N GOBLINS

■ Regarded as one of the hardest games to ever grace our medium, *Ghosts 'n Goblins* was one of the NES' best-selling titles. If you love testing yourself to the point of madness, it's a must.

A game for the masochist in you



GALAGA

■ Beginning life as an excellent arcade game before being ported to just about every console known to man, *Galaga* has a legacy of addiction and quality. One for the retro enthusiast in all of us.

The definitive space shooter

KILLER ACCESSORIES



SUPER SMASH BROS. GAMECUBE CONTROLLER

■ The Wii U's tablet pad isn't that comfortable, so if you want to play serious *Smash Bros.*, this GameCube throwback is for you. **RRP: £19.99**



PRO CONTROLLER, SNES

■ If you're going to be playing Nintendo Virtual Console games, you're probably better off with a Pro Pad – even better, one styled like a SNES controller. **RRP: $31.25**

BONUS



LINK HOODIE

■ Playing through any Zelda game, you're going to want to feel like a hero – with this not-just-a-run-of-the-mill-TriForce hoodie, you can.

RRP: £34.99

MULTIFORMAT MUSTS

The console war may rage on in the background, but over here in the third-party lounge, things are a lot more relaxed: just a friendly sales campaign playing out as different developers gun for different audiences. It's a competition that makes sure the triple-A scene remains as diverse and robust as it always has been. 2014 was a great time to be a gamer, and here's why:





DIABLO III: REAPER OF SOULS

360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, PC

■ A game that is *still* being updated with a slew of DLC packs (all fairly priced and accessible), *Diablo III* is another game that proves PC mechanics and design approaches can now work on console. *Diablo* has always been a better experience in multiplayer, and its local four-player co-op is something that we feel is missing from too many games these days.

The best co-op action-RPG (if you've got four pads)



DESTINY

360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One

■ Bungie's first game after jettisoning Microsoft from its galactic rise to development fame, *Destiny* proves that the asynchronous multiplayer game can finally work on consoles. With all the production quality of *Halo* mixed with the addictive madness that is *Call Of Duty*, *Destiny* shows no signs of slowing its titanic mission to be played by everyone anytime soon

The most ambitious FPS game on the market right now



MINECRAFT

360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, PC, Vita, iOS, Android

■ You can't escape *Minecraft*. after Microsoft's successful takeover of the game, and its parent company Mojang, we're likely to see it pushed even harder – but that's not a bad thing: for a singular price, you own the game for life, and every single update issued thereafter (and there are a *lot* of them), which promises to keep the game evergreen for at least the next five years.

Virtual Lego. Need we say more?



FIFA 15

360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, PC, iOS, Android

■ Only rivalled by *PES*, *FIFA* continues to offer the best football experience in gaming; full team licences, authentic player-by-player scanning and a wealth of modes means you can play *FIFA* without pause until it's overtaken by 2015's inevitable release. The pace of this year's addition gives it a nail-biting intensity that makes multiplayer sessions particularly exciting.

Turns your living room into the rafters



MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR

360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, PC

■ It's a game where you can invade the armies of Mordor and take over the minds of Orc commanders, one at a time. With combat somewhere between *Assassin's Creed* and *Batman: Arkham City*, it's not only good to play, but entertaining to watch, too. The Nemesis system, where Orc leaders remember their encounters with you, makes this a much deeper experience than it initially seems.

A great 'couples game', believe it or not

EDITOR'S PICK



ALIEN: ISOLATION

360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, PC

■ One of the most intensely scary and unremittingly tense games we've had the pleasure of playing, Isolation excels in all areas – from visuals to story to level design. Just when you think you might, possibly, maybe this time, be safe, you hear mysterious noises and terrify yourself in the process of eliminating where it's coming from. A masterclass in horror, and a must for *Alien* fans or horror nuts.

Ridley Scott should be proud



CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE

360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, PC

■ Kevin Spacey leads the way for virgin *Call Of Duty* developers Sledgehammer Games – a studio that took the series in a very different direction, but for the better. It might not sound like the kind of traditional *COD* gameplay we've become used to, with powered-up Exosuits, double jumps, and laser weapons, but it's a welcome breath of fresh air for a series that was getting a little stale.

***Call Of Duty*'s best outing in years**



GRAND THEFT AUTO V

PS4, Xbox One, PC

■ The game's release on Xbox 360 and PS3 was practically flawless anyway, but after having various assets reworked from the ground-up for the current-gen release version's 'FPS' mode, *GTA V* is once again an absolute must-have for any serious gamer, as the inclusion of a first-person mode has now given extra depth to the already engaging gameplay.

We really don't know how *GTA VI* will improve on this



FAR CRY 4

PS4, Xbox One, PC

■ As more and more *Far Cry* games hit the shelves, they seem to get more and more self-effacing: more willing to take themselves less seriously and just have fun in the semi-real settings they inhabit. This isn't a bad thing, and shows Ubisoft is willing to take notes from its consumers . *Far Cry 4* delivers all of the scale and scope of its predecessor, but with a hell of a lot more fun and insanity to enjoy.

Wonderfully self-aware, without being cynical



DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, PC

■ BioWare might have caused fans to worry about its output after *Dragon Age II* and the *Mass Effect 3* ending fiasco, but its clearly back on track now – current-gen's first triple-A open world RPG has certainly not been one to disappoint. It gives us the scale of world we've been waiting on *Dragon Age* to deliver with the kind of combat customisation that means any RPG fan will find their style catered for.

BioWare's return to form embodied

MOTION DENIED?

Once a seemingly permanent addition to the gaming landscape, motion control no longer seems to be a priority for developers. Is this a temporary setback or a terminal decline?

The biggest motion control story of 2014 was not a positive one. Kinect, initially pitched as an essential part of Xbox One, was made optional just six months after the console launched. While it was a move that had more to do with Sony's sales advantage than the merits of motion control, it was a loud announcement on Microsoft's part – and one which was enthusiastically received. Though it had been envisioned as an invaluable tool for developers and a key tool in Microsoft's vision of integrated living room entertainment, consumers far preferred the lower retail price to the functionality on offer.

It's definitely not the strongest stance that Microsoft could have taken about the importance of motion controls to its overall strategy, and the development community recognises this. "Removing the Kinect as an in-box feature is definitely a tacit admission of failure, and it's symbolic of the decline of (mainstream) console-based motion games over the last half decade," states Douglas Wilson of Die Gute Fabrik. Matt Boch of Harmonix, creative director of Kinect title *Fantasia: Music Evolved* is similarly frank: "While Harmonix as a company understands why it was good for Microsoft to offer consumers more choices, it doesn't make it an easy pill for me to swallow. To see lots of game fans, other developers, etc. kind of relishing in [Kinect's] failure has stung."



But while Microsoft created the biggest negative story about motion controls, that's only because its competitors in the console market aren't being too loud – both of them appear to have quietly shunted motion control down their respective lists of priorities. Despite the fact that it is supported by PlayStation 4, Sony's Move controller received barely any attention in 2014 – even fewer games were released than in 2013, which was a pretty barren year itself. Nintendo, the company which made the most convincing case for motion control with the Wii back in 2006, has made little of the Wii U's support for the Wii Remote.

It's a bizarre position to be in, as the value of motion controls should arguably be beyond question. After years of misfires with the likes of Sega's Activator controller for the Mega Drive, Sony's EyeToy delivered the solid functionality required to back up the inherent appeal of motion-controlled gaming and sold millions of units as a result. The success of the Wii thoroughly eclipsed that initial breakthrough, becoming the best-selling console of its generation and inspiring both Microsoft and Sony to offer their own motion control options. But as Kinect and Move were being introduced, the Wii's performance at retail began to slide as the family audience which had embraced it so enthusiastically moved on. Traditional core gamers weren't there to shore things up either, with many having abandoned the platform after becoming disillusioned with the games on offer.

The reason behind the hardcore exodus is no mystery. "Motion control isn't great at delivering traditional console game experiences," Boch explains. "If I start with all of the assumptions embedded in a given gameplay genre, and then try to apply motion controls to each of them in turn, I'm setting myself up to fail, as there are likely aspects fundamental to a given genre that will never work in motion control, because they arose from the affordances of the



controllers they were designed around." A quick look over online discussions of motion control would reveal that many players agree with him – the most common complaint is that motion controls are unnecessary in many of the games which use them, as a traditional control set would be far better suited to the job.

Part of the issue is simply that the technology is still developing. "Motion-control technology itself is in its early stages," says Michael Buckwald, CEO and co-founder of Leap Motion. The company's primary product is the Leap Motion Controller, a sensor which accurately recognises hand and finger motion across a variety of PC and Mac applications – something unimaginable for a consumer-level device until very recently. "The Leap Motion Controller introduced an entirely new computing interface, and we know that it takes time to create impactful change. For Leap Motion, this is the very beginning of a five to ten year journey."

However, Boch's point about the misapplication of motion controls to traditional genres is rather more interesting. Could we have been creating the wrong kinds of motion-controlled games? It's certainly possible – music games, now including Boch's *Fantasia: Music Evolved*, have used non-traditional control methods since the arcade heyday of *Beatmania* and *Dance Dance Revolution*, so players are already conditioned to accept that they won't be using a control pad. Additionally, Wilson's *Johann Sebastian Joust* certainly suggests that there is scope for design that barely resembles that of traditional videogames. Players holding Move controllers attempt to jostle each other to cause rapid motion in their opponent's controllers, while holding their own

"Motion control isn't great at delivering traditional console game experiences"

steady. The game doesn't involve a screen, and the PlayStation 4's most important function other than its status as a referee is to play the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, the tempo of which indicates the level of controller movement tolerated.

Wilson himself is keen to stay away from taking his design into the hardcore gaming space – "I'm personally more interested in multiplayer experiences and party games," he states. "I don't think 'hardcore' motion-control titles are impossible, but I do think it's a far more difficult task. Part of the problem is motion control works well in drawing attention to the action in the physical world, *in front of the screen*, whereas most hardcore games are about the fictional world inside the screen."

Highlighting the divide between the game world and the physical world is an interesting observation. It might simply be that for motion controls to gain wider acceptance amongst the hardcore, that divide needs to be eroded. Motion control alone might never appeal to the hardcore, but becomes much more exciting in combination with virtual reality technology – a field which is finally beginning to deliver. "When you interact with games in more natural and intuitive ways, they become more exciting," agrees Buckwald. "More immersive experiences paired with precise, accurate and zero-latency tracking will provide a more robust experience to any gamer, whether they're playing a first-person shooter or navigating a 3D world."

Boch is rather more cautious. "I think that VR holds great promise, but I would caution developers to consider the recent history of »







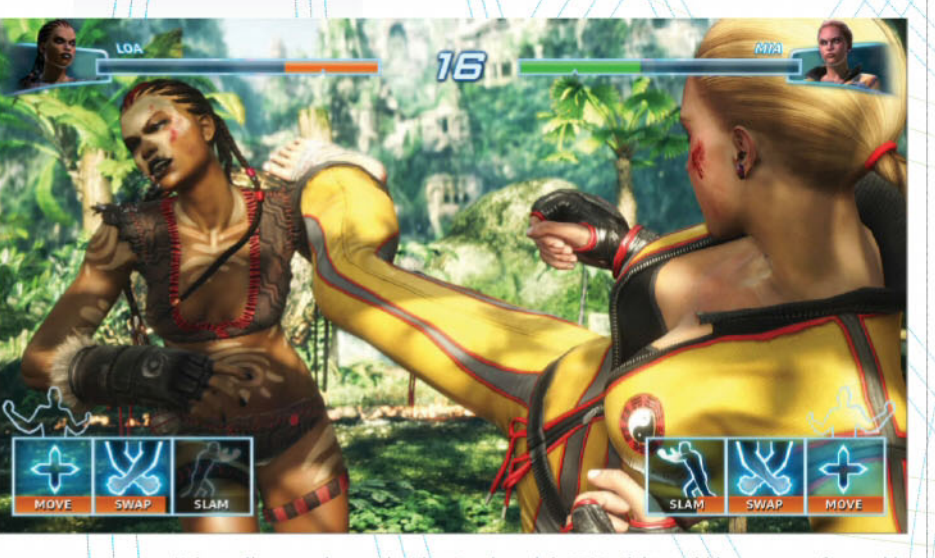
"The blind optimism of the last decade has been replaced with blind pessimism"

motion controls when attempting novel experiences with motion and VR. The next big trends are rarely the thing everyone is talking about!" It's a point worth considering. Virtual reality technology has yet to reach the mass market in any meaningful way, and is as such still an unproven commodity. "What I've experienced thus far has been a series of really promising and compelling tech demos, but very few of them demonstrate how we'll achieve the most popular "hardcore" game genres in VR," he continues. "While VR certainly adds some novelty to the experience of a platformer in *Lucky's Tale*, and improves the sense of depth – an aspect that 3D platformers have struggled with in the past – I'm not sure that novelty and subtle improvement is yet worth the numerous tradeoffs involved with having a screen mounted to your face. Even the slight discomfort involved with looking at the screen of the 3DS was enough for many players to forgo any advantages it affords."

While virtual reality does offer intriguing opportunities, Wilson argues that there is untapped potential in existing standalone technology. "The PlayStation Move is a deeply radical piece of technology, and doesn't get enough credit for how cool it is. I don't think Sony itself totally understood its potential! The programmable LED allows for all kinds of weird face-to-face games (like my own *Johann Sebastian Joust*, and some of my other installation games). Say you have four players – essentially, each is carrying a giant pixel around with them, so it's like you have a fluid four-pixel screen! Whether or not that makes *commercial* sense, who knows. But in terms of opening up innovative new games, the Move controller is really cool."



Dance Central Spotlight is one of the few motion control titles left on release schedules, benefiting from an elevated profile due to the success of its predecessors.



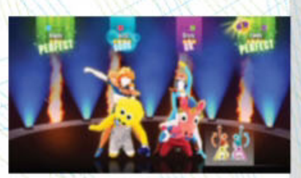
Universally panned upon the Xbox One launch in 2013, *Fighter Within* gave an unfavourable impression of the new Kinect's capabilities. Control problems were a frequent cause for complaint.

Boch believes that the same is true of Kinect. "I look back at the debut trailer for Kinect, and while many of the promises it made would be difficult to realise, a scant few of them have been attempted at all, let alone multiple times. I am optimistic that, with continued concerted effort, we could deliver a number of those experiences in a truly compelling fashion. But one attempt isn't enough; the process of arriving at new gameplay genre is a process of failing better."

He makes a very good point, and one that brings us back to the point that motion control is still a developing technology. A decade ago, Nokia's persistence with the N-Gage seemed foolish; today the mobile gaming market is enormous. But the N-Gage exhibited a number of the problems that motion control has over the last decade – it was tied very closely to traditional gaming by its button inputs and pricey MMC card-based software. The modern mobile gaming market, driven by the rise of the iPhone, relies on very different things – touchscreen input, digital distribution and a wealth of software which is offered for little or no cost to the consumer. The N-Gage had too many issues to ever take off, but it has been conclusively proven that it would have been a mistake to write off mobile gaming based on its failure.

MODERN MOTION CONTROL

The games that have defined motion control in the current generation



Just Dance 2015

A perennial casual hit, *Just Dance* is an unusual title amongst motion-controlled games in that it's a multiplatform release. The fact that multiplatform releases are so unusual serves to highlight the fact that while control pads have become largely standardised, motion-control systems vary greatly in their implementation.

Kinect Sports Rivals

As the last major Kinect release prior to the unbundling of the device, Microsoft had a lot riding on *Kinect Sports Rivals*. It had a range of games with different levels of physical exertion, and ultimately proved to be a reasonable release, but not one which made a major impact at the tills, and Rare apparently suffered staff losses as a result.



Wii Sports Club

Perfectly representing Nintendo's attitude to motion control in the current generation, *Wii Sports Club* was a relatively low-profile release which offers only HD remakes of the original *Wii Sports* games. It's one of few games which takes advantage of the Wii MotionPlus controller – Nintendo is now concentrating its efforts on the Wii U GamePad.

D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die

Designed by *Deadly Premonition* director Hidetaka Suehiro, this detective mystery employs both Kinect and pad controls and may signal a trend towards Kinect support as an optional extra control scheme. Reviews have praised the game's motion controls, but most players are likely to stick with the traditional pad option.





Fantasia: Music Evolved

Fantasia is one of the best-received motion control games of recent times, combining Harmonix's traditionally solid understanding of music-based gameplay with the wide appeal of a Disney property. The Kinect release is no coup for Xbox One though, as a version for the Xbox 360 is also available.



Audience acceptance of motion control is more common in music games such as *Fantasia: Music Evolved*, due to the genre's history of employing unusual controllers.



However, it remains to be seen whether the hardcore are willing to accept a mass reintroduction of motion controls. Wilson is critical of players that express opposition to the input method. "There are bad motion-control games, and good motion-control games; there are situations where you might want to play motion-control games, there are situations where you won't feel like playing motion-control games. But to be "against" motion gaming in *general* isn't a tenable position." Still, there's no question that opposition exists. "To put it lightly, the majority of console game players are less than enchanted with the concept of motion control at this point," says Boch "The blind optimism of the last decade has been replaced almost wholesale with blind pessimism."

While some serious image rehabilitation is needed before hardcore gamers start to take motion controls seriously again, they may not need to – the success of the Wii and mobile gaming has proven that it's perfectly possible to succeed by appealing to players outside of that demographic. In any case, the notion that motion control is dead is definitely a premature assessment. There's simply far too much potential remaining in the various input methods available, enough that each of the developers we've spoken to sees opportunities in different development directions.

"We think that motion control will continue to become more prevalent in the gaming world, especially with VR. We're just at the beginning of this new concept," says Buckwald. Wilson goes in the opposite direction, opting to minimise technology rather than maximise it: "I'd love to see other big companies (maybe even Valve, Google, or Apple) push their own motion-control devices. The Apple Watch might be a good early example here. I love console gaming, but there's also a rich future for motion control games outside of the living room, e.g. games you play out in the park." Boch champions existing technology: "I am confident I could continue to design solely for the Kinect for the rest of my days and never run out of new, compelling ideas to pursue."

New technologies in gaming often fail in their early incarnations, but good ideas don't disappear. Virtuality's headsets and the Dreamcast's dial-up modem didn't set the world on fire, but modern virtual reality is incredibly exciting and online gaming is now the standard. Right now, players are disenchanted with motion controls – but as long as developers are thinking about new directions for the technology, it will be impossible to declare motion controls dead.



HOW PLAYSTATION CHANGED THE WORLD



ON 3 DECEMBER 1994, A CONSOLE WAS RELEASED IN JAPAN. IT WAS AN UPSTART. A YOUNG PRETENDER ENTERING THE WORLD OF GIANTS LIKE NINTENDO AND SEGA. BUT WHAT BEGAN AS THE HUMBLE FIRST CONSOLE OFFERING FROM **SONY WOULD BECOME A JUGGERNAUT OF THE INDUSTRY**, ECLIPSING ALL BRANDS THAT CAME BEFORE IT AND THE LEADING CONSOLE OF THE CURRENT GENERATION. THE PLAYSTATION **CHANGED THE GAMING LANDSCAPE FOREVER**. BUT THERE HAS BEEN MORE TO THESE CONSOLES THAN SIMPLY SELLING UNITS AND CHANGING THE BALANCE OF POWER. THE GAMES THAT WERE RELEASED ON PLAYSTATION OVER THE YEARS HAVE HAD A **MASSIVE INFLUENCE ON EVERYTHING THAT WOULD FOLLOW**. THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT THESE PIECES OF HARDWARE AND THE PUBLISHING TEAMS BEHIND THEM THAT SEEMED TO ENGENDER **TRUE INNOVATION AND INDUSTRY-CHANGING IDEAS**. TO CELEBRATE 20 YEARS OF THE PLAYSTATION WE TAKE A LOOK BACK OVER THE GAMES THAT HAD THE BIGGEST IMPACT ON THE GAMES INDUSTRY, AND LOOK AHEAD TO HOW THE PS4 WILL LIVE UP TO THAT INTIMIDATING LEGACY »



PlayStation Game-Changers



FINAL FANTASY VII

Release: 1997 Developer: Square

■ Perhaps it was the stunning cutscenes or the detailed world, more likely it was the rich, deep and mature narrative it portrayed, but for whatever reason, *Final Fantasy VII* tapped into something in the west. The adult themes of *Final Fantasy VII* are legendary, and with good reason. Every role-playing game since has sought to channel some of the essence of this game into it, whether it's the willingness to kill important characters off, have a lead as cool and complex as Cloud, or just get a couple of cute winged animals into the action.



METAL GEAR SOLID

Release: 1998
Developer: KCEJ

■ Kojima had a field day with the PlayStation. The most innovative idea was the fourth-wall breaking way that *MGS* interacted with us. Psycho Mantis' controller-moving tricks and memory card-reading abilities. Shooting across screens against Sniper Wolf. And that's before we get to the voice acting and lengthy cutscenes.



RESIDENT EVIL

Release: 1996
Developer: Capcom

■ The fixed perspective of the camera added tension to every scene in *Resident Evil*, and the timing of the jump scares remains legendary to this day. The FMV wasn't anything to write home about, and we got clunky lines like 'Jill sandwich', but it set a great new bar for cinematic horror in games.



WIPEOUT

Release: 1995
Developer: Psygnosis

■ There were a few games on PlayStation that earned a new level of cool status with an older gaming crowd and one of them was *WipEout*. Primarily it was the relentless speed and music that did the trick, tying in nicely with the carefree, break-neck lifestyles of ravers and clubbers in the mid-Nineties. It helped make gaming cool and accessible.



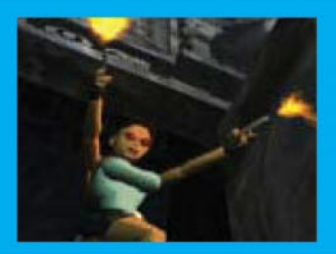
TEKKEN

Release: 1994
Developer: Namco

■ Was there a fighter in this generation of consoles played more than *Tekken*? Did any other fighter reach a bigger audience that had never played the genre before? The explosive action of this 3D fighter changed the entire landscape of who played these games and how they were delivered.



PlayStation Legacy The ideas that changed gaming forever



THREE-DIMENSIONAL GAMING

■ The additional memory afforded by using CDs meant that three-dimensional worlds became the norm on the original PlayStation, and since then, the industry hasn't looked back. If you consider all the great games of this era, like *Tomb Raider, Crash Bandicoot, Tekken* and more, they all updated 2D models and brought them new depth.



DUAL STICK CONTROL

■ It took the Dual Analog Controller (and later the DualShock) to tip it over the edge. The added control it gave players, especially over things like camera positioning, was revolutionary. It was a design unchanged for 16 years.



PS2 Innovators



GRAND THEFT AUTO III

Release: 2001 **Developer:** DMA Design

■ There has to be an argument for *GTA III* being the most influential game ever made. The gaming landscape certainly hasn't been the same since. 3D open world experiences became the pinnacle of the industry and remains so to this day. Freedom of player expression is more important now than ever, and it started with *GTA III*. It had one of the best voice casts of its time, the story was complex, winding and utterly gripping, and above all else, it launched the series into the stratosphere and set it on its path to being the biggest gaming entity on the planet.

GOD OF WAR

Release: 2005
Developer: SCE Santa Monica Studio



■ Before this, action games were pretty tactical and tough. Before this, their action was much more about skill. Kratos was pure rage and the players could vent that rage throughout the game. The violence and immediacy of *God Of War* has been much imitated, but rarely matched. This level of cinematic action was a class apart.

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

Release: 2005 **Developer:** Team Ico



■ Quiet, composed and methodical, Team Ico showcased a very innovative style of story-telling. *Shadow Of The Colossus* brought exploration, discovery and player ingenuity to the forefront. There were no sign-posts, no guides and barely any indication of what you were supposed to do. Just massive monsters to slay. Genius.

GUITAR HERO

Release: 2006 **Developer:** Harmonix



■ The launch of *Guitar Hero* put an addictive spin on karaoke that gamers could get on board with. Not only that but it made playing guitar feel achievable. It gave rhythm-action games a respectability they never had, brought in a new generation of gamers and a second life to the aging PS2.

GRAN TURISMO 3: A-SPEC

Release: 2001 **Developer:** Polyphony



■ Earlier *GT*s may have set the track, but it was *GT3* that took pole. The hundreds of cars, the stunning graphics, the precision of the handling are what we came to compare all racing games to. Games have gotten prettier, bigger, more detailed, but not better. *GT3* pushed the PS2 to new heights.



MOTION GAMING

■ Some credit the Wii with innovating on motion control or even point to Kinect for the controller-free arm waving that drove gaming innovation for a short while, but the EyeToy for PS2 was launched three years before Nintendo's console. It immediately embraced party gaming, too, paving the way for all the tech to follow.







CHRISTOPHE BALESTRA

Co-president, Naughty Dog



What was your first PlayStation gaming experience?
It was playing *WipEout*. I'll always remember when I realised I could swap the disc to listen to my own music… it blew my mind.

What do you think has been the most influential game on any PlayStation platform in the last 20 years?
GTA III was a major game-changer in our industry.

Are there any innovations introduced by PlayStation consoles over the years that you consider to be real game-changers for the industry?
The DualShock and the power of the PS3 opened up tons of new possibilities.

What do you think has kept PlayStation consoles at the cutting edge all these years?
All PlayStation consoles were ahead of their time when they came out. It definitively gave developers the potential to improve visuals and gameplay experiences with each new game release.

What PlayStation game are you most looking forward to (other than your own)?
Batman: Arkham Knight.

PS4 is already proving to be a great success over its competitors. Why do you think that is?
It's a console to play games and that's what people wanted. There was also an incredible line-up [of games] at launch that will only get better over time.

Is there anything in particular about PS4 that's exciting you for the future?
The games we'll be making for it…



EVAN WELLS

Co-president, Naughty Dog



What was your first PlayStation gaming experience?
It's hard to remember for sure at this point, but if I had to guess, it was *Battle Arena Toshinden.*

What do you think has been the most influential game on any PlayStation platform in the last 20 years?
There have been several, but if I only get to pick one, *Grand Theft Auto III.*

Are there any innovations introduced by PlayStation consoles over the years that you consider to be real game-changers for the industry?
Dual Analog stick controls.

What do you think has kept PlayStation consoles at the cutting edge all these years?
The diverse line-up of games.

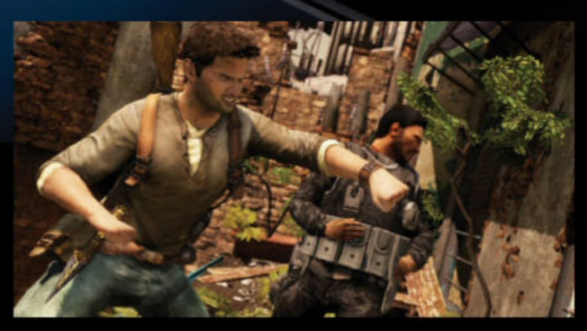
What PlayStation game are you most looking forward to (other than your own)?
No Man's Sky.

PS4 is already proving to be a great success over its competitors. Why do you think that is?
The hardware team made a console that put ease of development and a focus on games first.

Is there anything in particular about PS4 that's exciting you?
Yes, but I'm not at liberty to talk about it.



PS3 Shock And Awe



UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES

Release: 2009 **Developer:** Naughty Dog

■ The formula that Naughty Dog hit upon with its second Nathan Drake adventure was something very special indeed. No one else has yet managed to match it, even Naughty Dog itself. In terms of balancing and weaving character development into gameplay, it is unmatched. And then there's the overall pacing of the game and the wonderful ebb and flow of the setpieces that build to glorious crescendos. But perhaps the influence that's been most keenly felt was its use of motion capture in its cutscenes. These characters came to life on the screen and we can only hope this generation lives up to that promise.

LITTLEBIGPLANET

Release: 2008 **Developer:** Media Molecule



■ Empowering the player is something lots of developers talk about, but few have managed to achieve for real. How many developers did *LittleBigPlanet* help foster? Perhaps you should ask the team at Sumo Digital working on *LBP3*. There are quite a few of them there.

THE LAST OF US

Release: 2013
Developer: Naughty Dog



■ *Uncharted 2* was a huge step forward to action gaming, but *The Last Of Us* was something more. It was adult, intelligent, heartfelt storytelling of a calibre we've rarely seen. Its twists, turns and resolutions were pitch-perfect and it's likely to be much imitated for years to come.

HEAVY RAIN

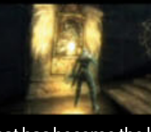
Release: 2010
Developer: Quantic Dream



■ Quantic Dreams' output is an acquired taste, but this stunning game and its unique motion-capture process gave it a depth few games have achieved. The dark, mature story has already seen many games follow in its footsteps.

DEMON'S SOULS

Release: 2009
Developer: From Software



■ Quite apart from birthing the *Dark Souls* titles, *Demon's Souls* tested the invasion system that has become the bright shining gem inspiring new ways of integrating multiplayer into traditionally single-player experiences across the industry. That and it helped to make punishingly hard games popular again.

PlayStation Legacy The ideas that changed gaming forever

GAME-SPECIFIC PERIPHERALS

■ The birth of *Guitar Hero* and *SingStar* were massive, not only for the industry as a whole as a new breed of players started to consider themselves gamers, but more specifically for the life of the PS2. The aging console suddenly had a new lease of life through these peripheral-based games, making it the heart of just about every party on the planet.



DISC FORMATS

■ Again and again, Sony backed the right horse when it came to media formats. CD was the right move ahead of cartridges back in 1994, DVD was the right choice for PS2 in 2000 and helped to popularise the format generally. And then Blu-ray beat out HD-DVD in no small part thanks to the influence of the PS3 convincing gamers it was the way to go.



The Mobile Groundbreakers



METAL GEAR SOLID: PEACE WALKER

Release: 2010

Developer: Kojima Productions

■ There had been some tentative attempts to bring Snake to mobile devices with the *Acid* games, but *Peace Walker* was a full *Metal Gear* experience. More than full in fact, because its influence has now even spread to the newest instalments. The decision to follow up one of the best *MGS* games ever in *Snake Eater* as a PSP game was bold, but making it mobile allowed for a tightening up of gameplay, opened up the Mother Base building as a nice dip-in piece of gameplay as well as adding resource management. *Peace Walker* brought new depth to *Metal Gear* and background to its mission structure beyond the cutscenes.



MONSTER HUNTER FREEDOM UNITE

Release: 2008

Developer: Capcom

■ There's got to be an argument that the likes of *Dark Souls* were empowered by the challenge and expansive world of this PSP hit. *Monster Hunter* was a kind of methodical grinding experience that we hadn't seen before on handhelds, save perhaps for the early days of *Pokémon*.

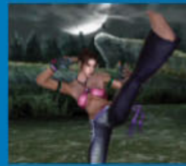


LOCOROCO

Release: 2006

Developer: Japan Studio

■ We don't often get to see real innovation in puzzle platformers, but *LocoRoco* had it in spades. Perhaps the most important point to mention was that it made good use of the format itself with the bumpers rotating the world on screen. It brought tactility to mobile gaming in an age before touch screens.



TEKKEN 5: DARK RESURRECTION

Release: 2005

Developer: Namco

■ Tekken Dojo was Drivatar before *Forza* came up with that abomination of a phrase. Sharing and importing ghosts of yourself to fight others online was ridiculously ahead of its time. Ghost packs could be downloaded from arcades around the world too. Cross-platform data and superb online gameplay? Superb.

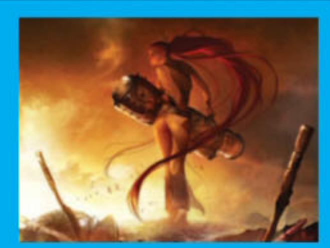


GRAVITY RUSH

Release: 2012

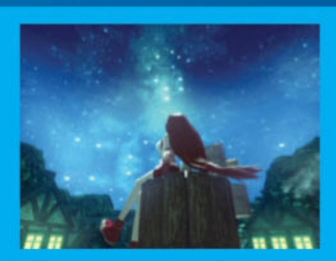
Developer: Project Siren

■ PS Vita has had some amazing games on it, but *Gravity Rush* stands out as the one that embraced the hardware better than most and really felt like it was only possible on this device. Using the touch pad to switch up gravity in the game world gave you instant control over the game like nothing else around.



VOICE ACTING

■ Thanks to the space afforded on CDs and even more so on DVD and Blu-ray, PlayStation helped to push acting performances in games from generation to generation. Audio files can be prohibitively large, but with the formats these consoles adopted, that wasn't a problem. The days of subtitles were left behind once the PlayStation started making its mark.



FULL MUSIC SCORES

■ Much like voice acting, music also got a huge boost from the CD format on PlayStation. Now games didn't have to rely on chip-tunes to code sounds to a cartridge board. They could be digital files like everything else on a disc and that meant CD-quality sound across the board.





How PS4 will uphold the legacy of innovation



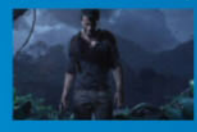
NO MAN'S SKY

Release: 2015 **Developer:** Hello Games

■ Procedurally-generated, shared-world, inter-planetary exploration and warfare ? Does that sound like anything anyone has ever attempted before on console? Hello Games is pushing insane new boundaries with *No Man's Sky* and frankly it's no great surprise to see it leading off on PS4 given PlayStation's history of breaking innovative new ideas first. The promise of being able to land on uninhabited planets, launch off into the sky and then travel through space is the kind of pure adventuring that kind of gives you goosebumps. It's incredibly ambitious, but if this doesn't have a massive impact on the rest of the industry, we'll be shocked.

UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END

Release: 2015 Developer: Naughty Dog



■ *Uncharted 3* was fun, but *The Last Of Us* was on a new level. We're not looking for a dark and brooding Drake or anything, but we expect *Uncharted 4* to push its new platform further, give us even more emotive performances from its cast and hopefully blow us away with the best action setpieces yet.

GRAN TURISMO 7

Release: 2015 Developer: Polyphony



■ If you want to know what a console can do, hand it to Polyphony. We've come to expect best-in-class graphical fidelity from the *Gran Turismo* games and as producer Kazunori Yamauchi told us recently, the team is already enjoying the hardware's infrastructure. No more long waits to see the best visuals of the generation.

SILENT HILLS

Release: 2015 Developer: Kojima Productions



■ What exactly are Hideo Kojima and Guillermo del Toro cooking up for us here? We'd like to think the greatest leap forward for survival horror since *Resident Evil 4*, and if that's the case, expect this game to make a huge splash, changing how action games get made for years.

RIME

Release: 2015 Developer: Tequila Works



■ We were waiting so long for Team Ico to bring us a new game that someone came along and made an *Ico* of their own. The Tequila Works team is updating those sparse, beautiful and weighty themes of *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, by adding some of the colour of *Wind Waker* as well as innovative light mechanics. We have high hopes.

PlayStation Legacy The ideas that changed gaming forever



LIVING ROOM GAMING

■ There are multiple reasons why gaming has largely moved out of the bedroom and into the living room, but they all go back to trends started by PlayStation. More grown-up themes meant adults kept gaming as they grew older; DVD on PS2 made it an affordable movie-player; and motion gaming and peripherals made it family-friendly. PlayStation made it all happen.



VR REVOLUTION?

■ What will PlayStation introduce next that could change the landscape of gaming? On PS4 right now, multi-room gaming and virtual reality through Project Morpheus seem to be the front-runners. With Sony's legacy, these are unlikely to be the only innovations we see this gen.



WEj 2011



10 YEARS OF



BLIZZARD'S GAME DIRECTOR ON WOW, TOM CHILTON, REFLECTS ON A DECADE OF MMO DOMINANCE AND HOW BLIZZARD'S EXPERIMENT CREATED A POP CULTURE ICON



TOM CHILTON

How many game developers can say they created something that impacted the world to the point of being a major plot point in not one, but two different comedic shows in the US? That could help inspire an entire web series (that in turn helped launch and popularise the concept of web TV shows), change the way other game developers think about rewarding players and become so synonymous with its genre that it's basically interchangeable with it.

Make no mistake, *World Of Warcraft* has been one of the most extraordinary gaming stories of its decade-long life span and as its latest expansion, *Warlords Of Draenor*, lands we thought we would sit down with its game director Tom Chilton to reflect on the last ten years and what it has all meant to him.

"It's awesome," he enthuses. "It's still makes me beam with pride every time I see *World Of Warcraft* being mentioned, whether it's on *The Big Bang Theory* or whatever, it's really cool when that stuff happens and a lot of times it's really funny. In general, we're very appreciative and lucky that *World Of Warcraft* has had that place in pop culture. That's just a happy outcome of having a game that worked out."

Speaking to Chilton at this auspicious time, it's interesting to find him express with such humility the way *WOW* managed to take over the world. Surely there was more to this than things having just "worked out", as he put it? At a time when developers talk of ten- »



AFTER A DECADE LEADING THE WORLD OF MMOS, *WOW* HAS SEEN A LOT OF EVOLUTIONS AND EXPANSIONS TO GET TO THIS HUGE MILESTONE.

year plans, was Blizzard thinking that far ahead as it began this epic adventure?

"We had a variety of different ideas for what expansions we could create, but we were very much going with the flow and flying by the seat of our pants, because Blizzard had never made an MMO before and it was still very uncertain what was going to happen", Chilton admitted. "It's only more recently that we've been able to start to look up a little bit more and look out into the distance."

And so begins to emerge a picture of *World Of Warcraft* that is not the polished, corporate behemoth we have come to see it as today, but rather a small team of developers working overtime to establish a new genre. All those years ago, as Blizzard looked to build on the success of its titles, *Warcraft*, *Starcraft* and *Diablo*, the MMO felt like a field it could really make an impact on. However, it remained a foreign land to the ragtag band of developers from across Blizzard who joined to finish the original game back in 2004.

"I came to Blizzard to work on *Warcraft* very much as a *Warcraft* fan from the *Warcraft* RTS games and there was a lot of influence and a lot of interplay between the RTS team and the *World Of Warcraft* team. Back then, when I came on board, the company was small enough for us to all fit on one floor of a smaller building than we have right now", Chilton explains. "Pretty much the entire design team from *Warcraft 3: The Frozen Throne*, the base game and basically all of the design team that was still at Blizzard from *Starcraft* were working on *World Of Warcraft*."

Since then, though, Blizzard hasn't been sitting on its hands, as Chilton explained earlier, there were always ideas for ways to build this world further, if not a firm plan. Quite apart from the five expansions the game has enjoyed over the last decade, each bringing with it new quests, dungeons and stories to Azeroth and beyond, we've also seen the graphics and models of *WOW* evolve too with each release. We asked Chilton for an insight into how these massive new extensions are put together.

"We always try to think what dungeons would really make sense with the zones that we're creating", he explains. "Are there hooks into *Warcraft* lore we can leverage that feel like they would be really exciting for players to explore and experience? Then we continue to move down the line from there. Once we have a sense of what the dungeon is, what it's about and who's in it, then we start thinking about what bosses might be in it. What are some characters that really drive why that dungeon would exist? What are they about? What are their goals? What are their motivations? What are their personalities? What are they like? And then we start to come with the actual mechanics that make sense to go with that boss. At that point we drill down more and more in terms of what the great gameplay experience is on a moment-to-moment basis that really helps to realise that greater fantasy."



A different approach is needed for the grander gameplay and world enhancements that Blizzard wants to explore, however, as the team is far more reactive to player needs than you might expect. "Interestingly, while we are able to look ahead much more effectively now in terms of game content and themes of future expansions, we do that much less so with game features", Chilton reveals. "With game features, we very much tend to approach them an expansion at a time, because it's very difficult to understand and predict the way the player base is going to evolve and understand what the needs of the player base are going to be."

And by player base he was keen to clarify that meant not only current players but also those who may have walked away from *WOW* in the past or those who've never played *Warcraft* before and who Blizzard wants to bring into the fold. "It's hard to know how long they are going to be interested in doing daily quests, or dungeons before they want something else. What is that something else going to be and what's the change of pace going to be? It's very difficult we find to predict significantly in advance. We have a couple of ideas for marquis features we can do in the future, but it's difficult to say exactly when those might line up."

> "We didn't want them to feel that they had to put up with 60 levels of lower-quality content to get into the more current, better stuff"

As an example of this, *World Of Warcraft* has become significantly easier to access and navigate, as a direct response to an ageing audience who want to get into their games faster as well as perhaps some newer, more impatient gamers used to the streamlined lobbies of *COD* and *Halo*. "We find that our players want to be able to interact with the game more casually now than they have in the past", admits Chilton. "So even though they have very nostalgic notions of the hardcore past, that's not how a lot of the player base wants to play the game or interact with the game anymore. That's one way in which the audience has changed.

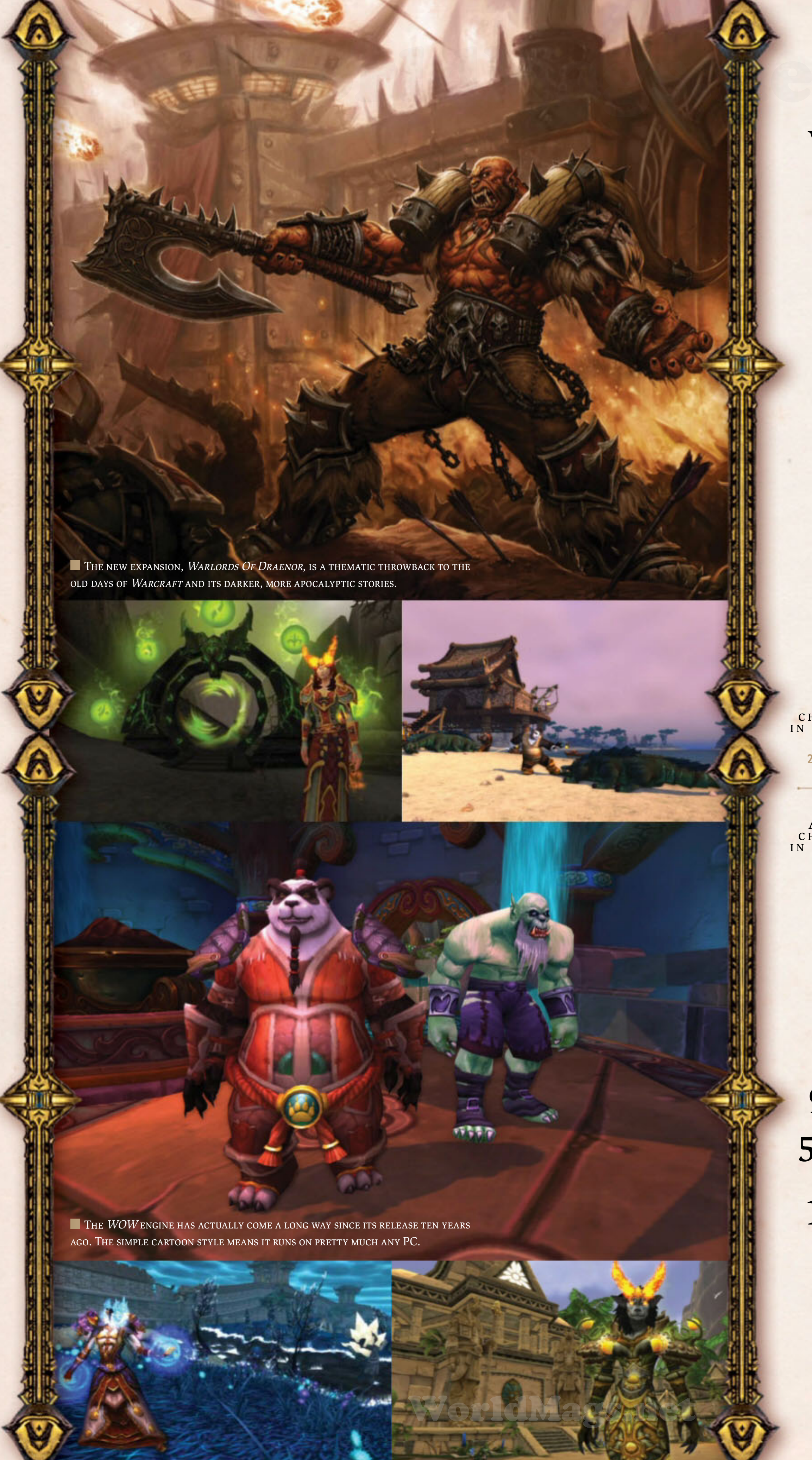
"Also, the audience has now in a lot of ways experienced the core gameplay of *World Of Warcraft* and there's an amount of it that they really like and appreciate that feels kind of like home to them, and at the same time they have an appetite for doing some new stuff. So one of the biggest challenges is trying to identify on an expansion-by-expansion basis what the new stuff is and exactly how to focus on that and how to make that a good new experience."

But it's a balancing act that has proved divisive at times, not least because terms such as 'casual' tend to be received with hostility by gamers who consider themselves hardcore fans of *WOW*. Chilton wanted to make sure his understanding of the phrase was clear to us. "I would definitely want to clarify that accessibility and being able to interact with the game more casually, doesn't necessarily mean that people don't want a challenge and those too often get confused with each other", he tells us. "There's the amount of time you spend and then there's the degree of challenge and we've actually gone out of our way over the years to service more of those different levels of challenge. That's why we have essentially four different difficulties of raids now. When *World Of Warcraft* first launched we only had 'pretty hard'."

It's a tough balance to strike, not least in the area of team building, where players gather to take on new quests together. Once upon a time it would have meant organically finding allies in Azeroth and leading them to the mission at hand, but now it can be more automated. Great for jumping into a game, but perhaps losing some of the social element that helped to make *World Of Warcraft* such a phenomenon. It is one area where technology has trumped tradition.

"As matchmaking mechanics have progressed over time people have much less of a tolerance for waiting around to get people together for group content, so that's definitely one of the trickier things for us to balance as we go forward, because we want to achieve a balance of cohesiveness between the groups and social interaction within the groups while also making creating those groups easier", explains Chilton. "Fortunately the evolution we've had in terms of cross-server technology is really helping in that regard. When you think back to *World Of Warcraft* ten years ago and absolutely nothing was cross server, when we first launched the game we didn't even have the ability for players to transfer servers; you had to make a completely new character on a different server if you wanted to move."

But there are those who still pine for the old days, thinking fondly of the long hard slogs through Stranglethorn Vale to Booty Bay, the challenge of the single-difficulty raids and so on. While Chilton understands people looking back ten years and thinking fondly of the early days of *WOW*, he tends to think such memories are more rose-tinted than people think and that if they really went back, they would realise how much they take new features for granted. "I think what a lot of people do is they confuse the emotional state they were in as a gamer, as it relates to the game at that time, with the actual gameplay of the game. When the game is new to them, everything is new and they're discovering things for the first time and the rest of the audience is discovering things for the first time, there's a different sort of energy and drive that players have that makes them a lot more willing to put up with hurdles and crap, essentially, to deal with that stuff and still have an enjoyable time; have a great time. You can't put people back in that greater frame of reference. You can't make


The new expansion, *Warlords Of Draenor*, is a thematic throwback to the old days of *Warcraft* and its darker, more apocalyptic stories.

The *WOW* engine has actually come a long way since its release ten years ago. The simple cartoon style means it runs on pretty much any PC.

Stats of Warcraft

The amazing numbers that make up the rise of *WOW*

Age of WOW players in 2013

- 16-20 29%
- 20-25 37%
- 25-30 18%
- 30-40 9%
- 40-50 1%
- Over 50 0.5%
- Unknown 5.5%

(according to Razer survey)

Subscribers around the world at peak

- North America 22%
- Europe 17%
- Asia 48%
- Other 13%

Most popular Horde characters in US and EU

1. Hunter
2. Death Knight
3. Paladin

Most popular Horde and Alliance races

Horde – Blood Elf
Alliance – Human

Most popular Alliance characters in US and EU

1. Hunter
2. Druid
3. Paladin

100,000,000 lifetime players

More than the population of Germany, Belarus and Sweden combined

Faction split

- Alliance 52%
- Neutral 1%
- Horde 47%

9 MILLION
guilds created

500 MILLION
characters created

In-game text is
12X LARGER
than *Lord Of The Rings*

Est.
$1 BILLION
in revenue in 2013

36%
share of MMO market
(next closest is *Lineage* with 9%)

A BLUFFER'S GUIDE TO WOW

You should be familiar with *World Of Warcraft* by now, but if not here's some terms you need to know

THUNDERFURY One of *WOW*'s most famous legendary weapons, this level-80 sword is pretty much synonymous with the badass weaponry fans love from this title.

CORRUPTED BLOOD A plague that originated in the dungeon of Zul'Gurub. It wasn't supposed to leave the dungeon, but players realised they could teleport out and the infection spread, decimating servers it was released on. It has since been patched, but was studied by disease-control experts.

LEEROY JENKINS What started out as a video of a trigger-happy guild member running into a boss battle without his team became a world-renowned meme and shorthand for hot-headed teammates who don't listen to the plan.

HEARTHSTONE A device that allows players to teleport home, often back to an inn. It now lends its name to the trading-card game *Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft*.

GOLD FARMING The act of accumulating in-game gold for sale in the real world for real money. A practice associated heavily with China and Indonesia, although not exclusive to those regions, it is against the terms and conditions of the game and participating in the sale of in-game gold can lead to be being banned.

RAID A gaming instance of player vs environment (or PVE) for five to 40-player groups each broken up into teams of five. It's essentially a co-op versus the AI-scenario battle.

CORPSE JUMPING The act of constantly dying and respawning in an attempt to reach an objective, area or NPC. The player will run toward their objective without attempting to fight through a mob, die doing so, and then travel back from the graveyard, respawning as close to their destination and as far from their dead body as they can.

GUILD An in-game association of players, often with a common interest in style of play or preferred gaming modes. It is also the term that inspired web series *The Guild*.

CATACLYSM The end-of-the-world event that changed much of *WOW* with its expansion in 2010. It begins with the return of the dragon Deathwing the Destroyer whose arrival causes an event called The Shattering, a tear in the dimensional barrier between Azeroth and Deepholm.

DPS Damage per second, a measurement of lethality. It's considered a better measure than the standard damage stat, particularly when comparing players of different levels.

TANK AND SPANK A common tactic of teams working on a raid, it involves drawing the focus of a mob or boss with a tank character who is constantly being healed. The rest of the team can then deal damage to the target unhindered.



What's in store for the future of *WOW*? Blizzard still has plans for further expansions to keep it alive.

» things the way they used to be in the large-scale sense. So, that's why we see that. People often want to play that kind of environment but when they do they realise, 'Oh, wait, no I've already been there and done that and it's not as good as it was when I first played it.'"

One of the biggest changes to *World Of Warcraft* was the *Cataclysm* expansion, which figuratively and literally reshaped Azeroth from that point forward. It was a massive moment in the lifetime of the game. The way in which it made changes to the early experience of the game proved controversial, however, and speaking to Chilton now he seemed to have mixed feelings about how successful the move had been.

Why did it happen at all? "We really felt like the quality of the questing experience had improved really dramatically and that was in a lot of ways evidenced by when people were referring their friends to the game what we often heard was, 'if you just get through those first 60 levels, the game gets really good after that.' That was something we didn't feel like new players should have to do. We didn't want them to feel that they had to put up with 60 levels of lower-quality content to get into the more current, better stuff."

That seems reasonable enough, but he wonders if players were as aware of this disparity as the development team was in the end. "In retrospect I don't know that the time we spent to do that was worth it for me purely from a 'how much did it benefit the game' standpoint. Certainly the quality of the questing in those older zones improved significantly and it's nice that we have that now, but it cost us in terms of the amount of time and effort we spent on the end game at the time and our continuing audience definitely felt that."

Which brings us neatly to the latest expansion, tying in nicely with the tenth anniversary of the game and also acting as a bit of a throwback to some classic *Warcraft* themes. "What we really did think about when we were working on *Mists Of Pandaria*, we knew it was a kind of departure from a lot of the traditional end-of-the-world *Warcraft* stuff and more about adventure and exploration of a new place. After that we wanted to get back to some very traditional *Warcraft* themes. That and the fact it feels like a bit of a throwback is very deliberate, it's just that lining up with the tenth anniversary is kind of a coincidence."

After a decade of dominance that has seen its subscribers drop a little from their 12-million-strong high, we couldn't help but wonder how *World Of Warcraft* will end. Much as JK Rowling was said to have the final page of Harry Potter written, we asked Chilton if a finale was planned and hidden in a drawer somewhere at Blizzard.

"Well, I can't say there is. I wish we could in some ways, but then it's nice to know that *World Of Warcraft* evolves with its player base, because being an MMO that has players actively participating in the world itself means the players are such a huge part of the story. We kind of need to go where it happens to take us. And we also consider that *World Of Warcraft* isn't really a plot-driven game. It's more of a game about setting and so to have a very specific plot line with a very specific ending is in some ways antithetical to what our game is."

So, for now at least, there seems to be no end in sight for *World Of Warcraft*. It's established itself in the pro-gaming community and there's greater connectivity around the world today than a decade ago. Here's to the next ten years.

DELETED SCENES

THE GREAT GAME CONTENT YOU'LL NEVER GET TO PLAY

A lot can change in a short amount of time. With games taking years to be made – and passing through countless hands and across the desks of dozens of bigwigs – there's even more chance of things ending up on the cutting room floor, being dropped, muscled out or otherwise changed in some way.

games™ has rooted around said floor of cuttings to find some of the biggest, strangest, most interesting and most annoying slices taken out of games that made it to our consoles and computers. Whether it was a beta feature that just didn't work or overpromising on the part of an enthusiastic PR, there's always a reason something doesn't quite make it. Here are just 17 of those features, lost forever in a sea of emptiness. >>



1 SMASH BROS DAMAGE SYSTEM

GAME: Super Smash Bros.

RELEASE DATES: 1999-2014

WHAT WAS CUT?

Characters, stages, music, sound effects, animations and more – including a system to show physical damage via damaged clothing/armour – have all been unearthed through glitches in the *SSB* series, as well as the more traditional route of tinkerers tinkering. MewTwo, for example, was meant to make a return in *SSB Brawl*, as was discovered after a lot of hacking.

WHY DID IT GO?

It's easy to speculate – time and resources are the usual cause – but in the case of some missing elements, like people who said they'd recorded dialogue for the game (step up, Opie & Anthony's Anthony Cumia), maybe it was simply because they blabbed about being in the then-secret project? It's fun to speculate.



2 THE KOTOR 2 ENDING YOU DIDN'T GET TO SEE

GAME: Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic 2

RELEASE DATES: 2004

WHAT WAS CUT?

A lot of content didn't make the finished version, but the most important is the ending. A whole area towards the end of the game was cut, and an abbreviated finish left players feeling rather short-changed after sinking so many hours in. This was remedied somewhat with a fan restoration project, thanks to many files still being on the game discs, and it's now available as a downloadable mod.

WHY DID IT GO?

LucasArts had outsourced development of its RPG sequel to Obsidian Entertainment. The last thing Obsidian needed was an upcoming holiday season that the Lucas bigwigs decided *KOTOR 2* had to be out in time for. But that's what happened, and the game ended up with a good chunk of it – as in, the actual ending – excised and hastily replaced with something nobody even remembers.



THE LOST POOLS

GAME: The Sims 4

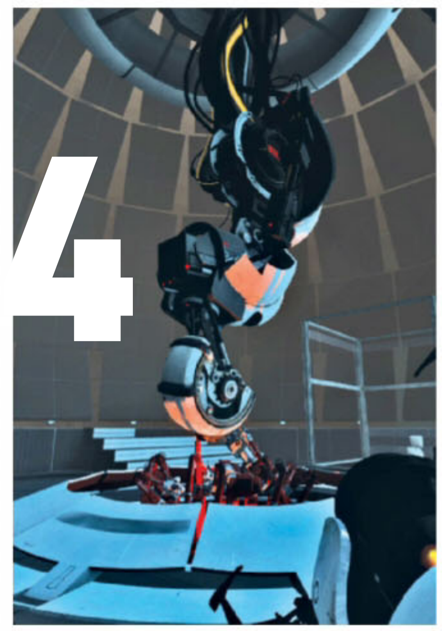
RELEASE DATES: 2014

WHAT WAS CUT?

At the last count, 89 elements featuring in previous entries to *The Sims* had been found lacking in the most recent EA life-simulator. While not cut content per se – if it was never in the *Sims 4*, it can't be cut – it is worth mentioning if only for how badly fans reacted to missing elements like swimming pools and toddlers. Lacking a number of career options, smaller neighbourhoods, no cars and many other basic options, it hasn't gone down well. Oh, and a lack of 64-bit client, meaning you're limited to 4GB of RAM, is pretty daft.

WHY DID IT GO?

EA was asked repeatedly about the missing features, and the basic reasoning was that it was difficult to get all of these elements into the new engine. Swimming pools are set to be arriving 'soon', at the time of writing, but we're unlikely to ever see toddlers.



PORTAL PVP

GAME: Portal 2

RELEASE DATES: 2011

WHAT WAS CUT?

A competitive multiplayer mode and a gel that allowed you to walk on walls never made it through, but the cuts to the story are more interesting. Cave Johnson was originally meant to be the main antagonist in a GlaDOS-less *Portal* game. There was also a scene intended for the finished game in which Johnson forced Caroline (who later becomes GlaDOS) into a robot body. Later, players would encounter Johnson, his consciousness trapped inside a computer deep in the bowels of Aperture Science, and put him out of his misery.

WHY DID IT GO?

Competitive multiplayer, described as like a cross between *Speedball* and *Portal* – didn't fit, while the wall-walking gel made people nauseous. The other elements, though, were considered way too dark for the largely lighthearted game.



SEQUEL BONUS

GAME: Banjo Kazooie

RELEASE DATES: 1998

WHAT WAS CUT?

Originally meant to reward dedicated players of the *Banjo* series, the Stop n Swop feature would allow those who had collected a series of secret items from *Banjo-Kazooie* to unlock additional features on *Banjo-Tooie*. All they would have to do is collect the items (obviously), then switch the N64 off and swap cartridges, before powering back up. Their data would be carried over and new elements would be unlocked. Genius!

WHY DID IT GO?

Because Nintendo changed how the N64 actually worked. The original window of ten seconds to switch out cartridges was brought down to a much less manageable one second, making it impractical – if not impossible. Stop n Swop was brought back in its original, intended form with the XBLA releases of *Banjo Kazooie* and *Banjo Tooie*, though – a happy ending.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CIVIL WAR?

GAME: The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

RELEASE DATES: 2011

WHAT WAS CUT?

The civil war. You may be thinking, 'But I took part in that underwhelming battle, it's definitely in there'. You're right – it is. But the civil war as it was *intended* to be would have seen so much more player involvement, winning over supporters, gaining new territories and generally playing in a much more involved subplot than the finished game offered. There was also seasonal weather.

WHY DID IT GO?

Nobody is really sure, as the civil war features had a lot of work put into them at the point they were chopped. Maybe it was technical limitations, with the consoles not able to handle the ever-changing land ownerships. Maybe it would have proved better than the core quest. We may never know.





ZELDA'S LOST 64DD EXPANSION

GAME: The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time

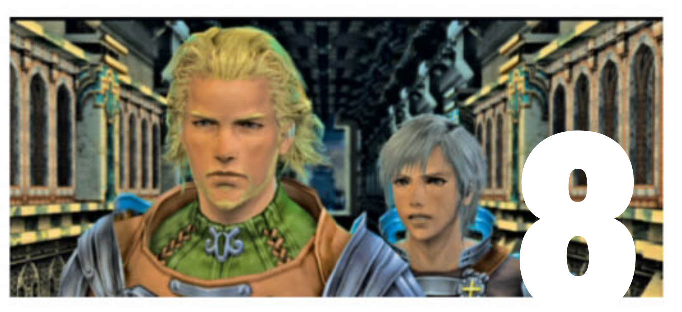
RELEASE DATES: 1998

WHAT WAS CUT?

Ocarina was meant to be a flagship title for Nintendo's 64DD add-on disk drive, but because of the peripheral's many delays, it was moved to N64. An expansion disk was intended so players could carry on from the console to the add-on – you can create saved games with 64DD functionality, but they break the game and are unusable. Then there's the music in the Fire Temple, which was changed after it was found to contain a sample of Islamic prayer.

WHY DID IT GO?

It was actually Nintendo's internal policies – avoiding all religious content – that caused the Islamic prayer to be removed, as its inclusion was an honest mistake on the company's part. As for the 64DD content? Well, the add-on wasn't a resounding success – no point in making anything for it? Speculate.



A DIFFERENT HERO

GAME: Final Fantasy XII

RELEASE DATES: 2007

WHAT WAS CUT?

The main character. Well he was still in Square Enix's most underrated entry to the long-running RPG series, but instead of being front and centre like he should have been, Basch was relegated to playing second fiddle to... someone else... who we've forgotten. Oh yeah: Vaan. The blandest character in the world, ever. Basch was the one who was actually written *to be a character*, not an empty cipher.

WHY DID IT GO?

Because of *Vagrant Story*, basically. While much-loved by those who played it, *VS* wasn't actually played by many on its release. Ruffling the feathers of risk-averse people at Square Enix, it was decided to stick with what the company knew – no rough-and-tumble older male leads, just blonde-haired, vapid shells aged between 16-20.



FIGHTING PROF. OAK

GAME: Pokemon Red/Blue

RELEASE DATES: 1999

WHAT WAS CUT?

A fight with Professor Oak, seemingly. He has both a fight scene sprite on the game's cartridge and a team of pocket monsters to call his own – all high-ranking, actually, coming in at a higher level than the Pokémon Champion's collection. You can still glitch your way into battling the prof, but it just doesn't feel like you've really earned it – like you would have had it been a natural progression to battling him at the game's climax.

WHY DID IT GO?

This one's a bit of a mystery, like so many things in life. It would have made perfect sense in the game's narrative – Oak was a former trainer, he'd been accused of getting soft, he could have made a return battle against the player to show he still had the chops. Alas, it wasn't to be. All we're left with is glitches.



RISKING ELIZABETH

GAME: BioShock Infinite

RELEASE DATES: 2013

WHAT WAS CUT?

If you take a look back at any trailer released soon after *BioShock Infinite* was announced, you'll see many features that didn't make it to the finished game. Elizabeth was originally involved in a risk-reward system, where asking her to use her powers caused her pain – possibly death. There was a multiplayer mode talked about. The Songbird and Handymen played more interesting roles. The entire storyline was actually quite different at points during development.

WHY DID IT GO?

It's fairly well known now that Infinite had something of a torturous development cycle, and as the years – and costs – mounted, someone had to step in and get the damn thing finished. This meant anything that wasn't working, anything too ambitious, anything too complex was on the chopping block. As such, we ended up with a game surrounded by promises, few of which were *really* lived up to.



THE TEMPLAR HUNT

GAME: Dragon Age II

RELEASE DATES: 2011

WHAT WAS CUT?

Dragon Age II was a confused game, and it showed to anyone who put in the hours. Inconsistencies are explained when you learn of how many story elements were cut or changed throughout development. For example, Hawke and Bethany were meant to be pursued relentlessly by the templars, which would have given them incentive to go on the Deep Roads expedition. There's Varric's recounting of the tale – in the prologue he is shown to be an unreliable narrator. This was meant to continue throughout the game, but it didn't and his character was neutered. And there was meant to be the return of Anders' beloved kitty, Ser Pounce-a-lot – alas, the cat did not return.

WHY DID IT GO?

Mainly time constraints, especially with elements like the missing cat (no time to model a new one) and enemies like shrieks making a reappearance. As for the story elements, it's a mixture of time, pressure from above and the simple fact it's a big story – there's bound to be holes.



A DOG COMPANION

GAME: The Last Of Us

RELEASE DATES: 2013

WHAT WAS CUT?

While we all know Ellie's original design was changed, there are other elements you might not know about – like her injured dog that didn't make it to the finished game, the different monsters (like the one pictured) or the entirely different ending that was written. But even with a huge swathe of cuts, *The Last of Us* was still a masterpiece.

WHY DID IT GO?

A lot of the elements were cut in the planning stage, while the different ending was changed as the making of the game progressed. But the big reason behind a lot of the cuts ties in with Naughty Dog's first ever delay – the studio needed the time to make the game great. Pre-delay it was considered internally as 'good' – judicious cutting brought the project down to manageable levels, making it more focused and making it 'great'.



ESCAPING DEATH

GAME: Dark Souls

RELEASE DATES: 2011

WHAT WAS CUT?

Plenty of elements cut from *Dark Souls* would have made the game even harder – like Darkroot Garden's possessed trees attacking the player. But there were also cuts that *made* it more difficult, like making Frampt and Kaathe immortal, removing characters who would have aided the player and – hilariously – removing a miracle called 'escape death', which would have allowed players to die, but retain their souls and humanity.

WHY DID IT GO?

Most decisions to cut were made in the name of balance, which will come as no surprise to anyone who has ever played *Dark Souls*. And it shouldn't be a shock to learn that the escape death miracle was removed as it totally ruined the penalty of death. Which would have, frankly, totally ruined *Dark Souls*.



MASSIVE CAR CRABS

GAME: Wasteland 2

RELEASE DATES: 2014

WHAT WAS CUT?

It's only a recent release, but already we know of a few elements that didn't make their way into the *Wasteland* sequel we waited 26 years for. Locations like the La Brea Tar Pits didn't make it past planning and concept art, while the awesome-looking car-crabs disappeared after showing early on – but worst of all was the loss of the Gippers faction: a group dedicated to the teachings of one Ronald 'the Gipper' Reagan.

WHY DID IT GO?

Brian Fargo is a man of many ideas at the worst of times, so when he's had 26 years' worth of ideas – and when he has a team of talented writers on board, also with their own ideas – it can become quite hard to implement everything. But maybe, just maybe, we'll see those Gippers added in a future update. We can but dream.



INTRO AND HUB

GAME: Destiny

RELEASE DATES: 2014

WHAT WAS CUT?

This is a tricky one, in that it's mired in controversy and conflicting information – the official line is 'we didn't cut things', but a fair amount of evidence shows that the *Destiny* released in September was not the *Destiny* that was promised, or planned, all those years ago. Tongues are wagging on changes to the intro, sightings of the Reef being used as a hub location and weapons not needing ascendent energy or spinmetal to upgrade.

WHY DID IT GO?

The official claim is that content was not cut or held back to be released as DLC, and to be fair it's a challenge to talk about this kind of thing without concrete evidence – otherwise it all goes a bit conspiracy theory. But people *have* found areas that will be used in DLC on the disc, and changes *have* been made that slow down your progress in the game. We'll see what the updates add.



NO MORE HYDRA

GAME: Half-Life 2

RELEASE DATES: 2004

WHAT WAS CUT?

A hell of a lot. The story was made less dark, with the Combine originally meant to be draining the earth of all its resources, enemies like the Hydra – you may have seen its blue tentacles on promotional screens – were cut, characters were fused, at one point you could discard weapons… the list goes on.

WHY DID IT GO?

Another victim of time and hype. Expectations might have been met, even surpassed, when *HL2* did come out, but plenty had been dropped since its first showing. While many of the cuts will have been the natural order of things – albeit with time as a lesser concern, because this is Valve – it's hard not to be disappointed when stuff we'd been shown in promotional materials for years didn't come to pass. The Hydra, meanwhile, was cut because its AI was too difficult to manage.



SUPERPOWERS

GAME: Resident Evil 4

RELEASE DATES: 2005

WHAT WAS CUT?

At least three versions of *Resident Evil 4* – we don't know how complete they were, but they were shown off and all looked rather different. All were scrapped, with certain elements retained (like Leon's spiffy jacket). But the fog-monsters, Leon's superpowers, the airship, the mansion, an attack on Umbrella Europe, the *actual* zombies and the bad dude with the big hook were all excised. There were some huge iterations at play.

WHY DID IT GO?

The first build of *Resident Evil 4* was too 'actiony' and was dropped entirely, only to go on and become *Devil May Cry*. The other versions were too supernatural (i.e. Leon's powers from his arm), and the idea of including zombies and Umbrella, by that point, just felt passe. Instead we got one of the best action games ever made – one that revolutionised the genre. Not all cuts are bad.

5 DIRECTOR'S CUTS

IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT TAKING THINGS OUT OF GAMES – SOMETIMES YOU GET MORE PUT INTO THEM



RESIDENT EVIL: THE DIRECTOR'S CUT

ORIGINAL: 1996

DIRECTOR'S CUT: 1997

The original game might have had more beta-to-finished changes than *Resi 4*, but it was still the first game in the series to get a re-release with additional content, including new weapons, camera angles, items and difficulty modes. There was also a re-release of the re-release, in the shape of the DualShock version of the Director's Cut.



METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SUBSISTENCE

ORIGINAL: 2005

DIRECTOR'S CUT: 2006

One thing a good director's cut does is make the original irrelevant – and that's exactly what this three-disc PS2 package did. Subsistence tweaked and added elements to the main game – like a better camera – but also offered extras like *Metal Gear Online*, sneaking missions and a 3.5 hour *MGS3* 'movie'. Brilliant stuff.



HATOFUL BOYFRIEND

ORIGINAL: 2011

DIRECTOR'S CUT: 2014

Originally released on April Fool's Day as a hasty joke at the expense of the otome genre, *Hatoful Boyfriend* ended up being popular enough to force its creator, Moa Hato, to learn how to make a full visual novel game. In which you romance pigeons. *Hatoful Boyfriend* is the ultimate director's cut (about avian dating).



SUPER MARIO ALL-STARS

ORIGINAL: 1985-1991

DIRECTOR'S CUT: 1993

When you've made some of the best platformers ever seen on the NES – and *Super Mario Bros 2* – you might as well show them off to the world in glorious More Spangly Vision. As such, Nintendo spruced up and re-released four Mario games for *Super Mario All-Stars*, this time on the SNES – it still stands as one of the best director's cuts ever made.



THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND: SPECIAL EDITION

ORIGINAL: 1990

DIRECTOR'S CUT: 2009

One of the last titles released by LucasFilm Games, the director's cut of *Monkey Island* was a gorgeous and loving recreation of a time 20 years prior, when point-and-click adventure games ruled the world. And then Lucas shut down, and broke all of our hearts for good.

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Reviews



94

CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE

Has Sledgehammer's fresh take on the series given it the new lease of life it's going to need on this generation of consoles?

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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AN INVIGORATING, TIRESOME, THRILLING CHORE

Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare

It begins with North Korea invading Seoul and a grisly decapitation, and climaxes with a ludicrous mechanised turkey shoot that takes place partially underwater, and yet *Advanced Warfare*'s single-player offering might just be the least memorable *Call Of Duty* campaign in the series' solid history. It neither returns to the sour and sobering roots of the original *Modern Warfare*, nor does it contain anywhere near enough of the blaring cartoon stupidity that has become the franchise's stock-in-trade. Instead it falls into the disastrous trap of tackling a ridiculous, amped-up scenario with (relatively) crippling earnestness.

With the exception of a couple of sequences that feel both thoughtfully directed and lavish – the Spacey-led tour of Atlas HQ and the lively freeway chase – the gameplay is even more confined and straight-laced than it usually is. *Call Of Duty* in single player has never been about freedom or experimentation, but the uncharitable yearly catcalls about it being "on-rails" have never rang truer. This is doubly disappointing because the multiplayer side of things hasn't felt this fresh and punchy since 2010 at least, and the fact that the campaign isn't utilised as a platform on which to learn the intricacies of the Atlas exo-suits is simply a clueless, trivial blunder.

Kevin Spacey's recent confession that he signed on to play Atlas honcho Jonathan Irons without first reading a script won't come as a gigantic surprise to anybody. The character goes from grieving father to cuckoo warmonger in a matter of minutes, and the actor isn't shy about bringing out the ham when the time comes for his character to move centre stage. The promise of a sophisticated and coercive villain has never crumbled this quickly, and the plot is left to follow the same shouty, lingo-stuffed fire and brimstone schematic as usual. That said, even if this vague attempt at a narrative wasn't so perilously uninteresting, it is the staunch lack of flexibility in the gameplay that really sabotages the experience.

FURIOUS MULTIPLAYER: *Advanced Warfare* has the broadest choice of options and modes ever seen in a *Call Of Duty* game. *Black Ops* fans will be thrilled to see the return of the beloved Hardpoint.

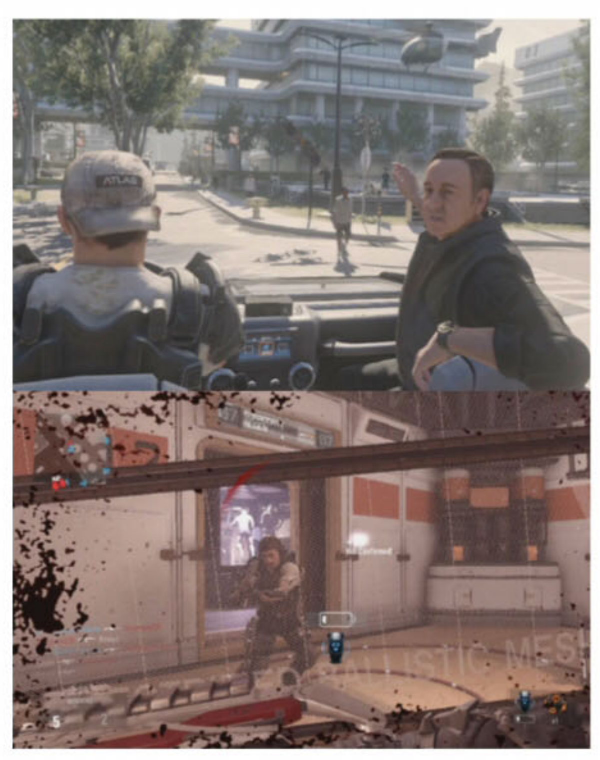
The decision to name a lead character "Prophet" is surely an intentional nod to Crytek's revered *Crysis*, but the chasm between that game's strategic modus operandi and this one's is very stark indeed. The soldiers in *Advanced Warfare*'s vision of 2054 come equipped with all manner of cool toys for players to mess around with, but you're only allowed to use them within a string of rigid and segregated windows. Take out a second floor sniper with designs on using your newfangled boost jump to steal his position, and you're almost always shut out by an invisible wall. Really neat techniques, like being able to hover over gaps or use boosters to break long falls, can be used once or twice before being

EVEN IF THE NARRATIVE WASN'T THIS UNINTERESTING, IT'S THE LACK OF GAMEPLAY FLEXIBILITY THAT REALLY SABOTAGES THE EXPERIENCE

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Playstation 4, Playstation 3, Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Sledgehammer Games, Raven Software
PRICE: £59.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-18
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Below: Visually this is a much more imaginative campaign than *Ghosts* was, and the Atlas tour at the beginning is often jaw-dropping



Above: The premium *Call Of Duty: Elite* service is now a thing of the past, but you will need to sign up for a (free) *COD* account if you want to play clan matches. Setting one up from scratch is a brisk, painless process

Left: The drop pod cylinders that deploy *Advanced Warfare*'s soldiers into warzones look remarkably similar to the grunt vessels from *Titanfall*

BETTER THAN

CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS





WORSE THAN

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS

Money for old dead

Zombies mode – fan favourite creation of the off-duty team at Treyarch – is coming to *Advanced Warfare* in the form of DLC, available as part of the game's season pass. This is the first time in *COD* history that a new gameplay mode has debuted as DLC, and the first time that a team other than Treyarch has had a go at Zombies. If you aren't interested in a season pass, zombies also appear in Exo-Survival co-op, but to unlock them you'll have to complete every single wave on every single difficulty, before unlocking the rock-hard Riot mode and beating that. Good luck.

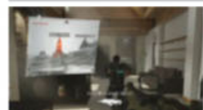
Inset: The exo-suit's boosters aren't just handy for reaching high platforms, they also allow you to recover from mis-judged jumps



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

45 MINS



Wow. This game sure involves a lot of following NPCs around. More so than every other *COD* campaign. Things are surely going to sharply improve pretty soon. Surely they will?

7 HOURS



The campaign fizzles out with a predictable whimper. You can leap back in to unlock more upgrades for your character, but it doesn't extend to multiplayer so what's the point?

7 DAYS



The perk system makes perfect sense, your carefully chosen spread of go-to loadouts have been established and victories are coming more and more regularly. There goes the Christmas break.

discarded altogether. You're taught to destroy drone swarms with your EMP grenades, before almost immediately being presented with a scripted flock that can't be interacted with.

The grappling hook (pinched wholesale from *Just Cause 2*) demands that you wait for a very heavy-handed button prompt before you can use it, and if you think that you aren't going to have to spend at least five in-game minutes crouching behind various pieces of identical cover to avoid various identical enemy patrols, you are dead wrong. You're essentially led from familiar set-piece to familiar set-piece, at which point you're asked to hit a single button to perform a superhero manoeuvre or five. The game's repetitive nature isn't even leavened by a blast of the series' patented brand of tyrannical lunacy, which is pretty unfortunate when you consider that even the dour *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* rewarded players for enduring five-plus hours of convoluted seriousness with a demented zero gravity set-piece, in which you faced off against AK-47 wielding astronauts 200 miles above the earth's surface. Nothing in *Advanced Warfare* is anywhere near that wacky, and the fun factor suffers as a result.

But while the campaign is an exercise in banal box-ticking, and Kevin Spacey's involvement is even more tokenistic than it initially appeared to be, the multiplayer is anything but those things, and can stand proudly alongside the finest competitive suites to have ever featured in a *Call Of Duty* game. The exo-suits are unquestionably inspired by kit from both *Crysis* and *Titanfall*, but the reality is that even with the brazen, explicit steals (cloaks, quick stims and instantly deployable shields) this is still, ineffably, a *Call Of Duty* game.

Play is structured around a modified version of *Black Ops 2*'s excellent 'Pick 10'

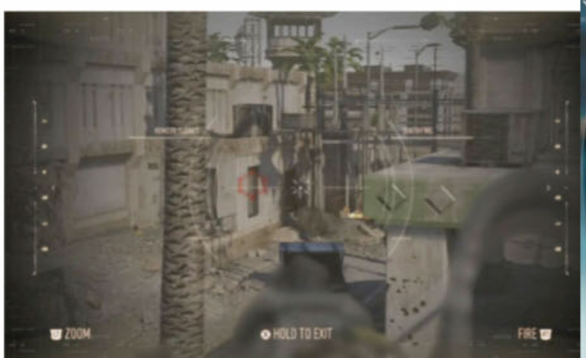
T(h)reat Grenades

The coolest tech available to you in *Advanced Warfare* arguably comes in the shape of the newfangled Threat Detection grenades. Toss one into a busy area and every enemy is instantly rendered in dazzling red – visible even through cover – for up to fifteen seconds. You're given numerous opportunities to use them in combat, but running out can leave you stuck in a really frustrating limbo. In battle there is very little to differentiate between your enemies and the people you're fighting alongside: everyone's dressed in dark, generic military gear. Use up all of your threat grenades and you're forced to stare down your sights at every target first, to double check that you aren't about to slay a teammate.

Below: The new tech and weaponry of *Advanced Warfare* really gives it the sense of fun the series has been missing recently.

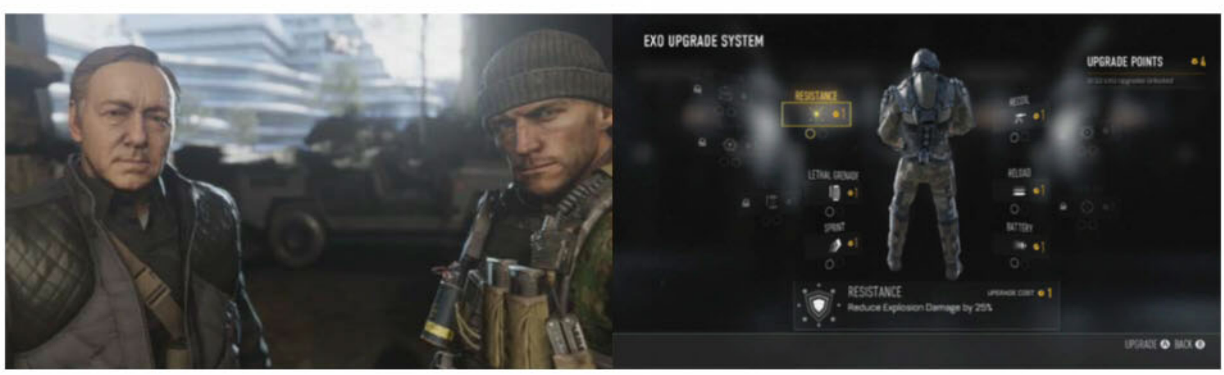


Left: *Call Of Duty* has always been known for its explosive action, but now it permeates every second of the game, raising your heart rate whenever it can.





Right: Survival Mode is a blunt but effective co-op that doesn't quite measure up to the much-loved *Spec Ops*… but works just fine. Constant communication is beyond mandatory – things get tricky very, very quickly.



Left: You build the attributes of your character through the campaign with kills, headshots and grenade kills. They're standard combat upgrades like faster reload times, less recoil, more grenades

system, except this time you're given 13 slots instead, allowing you (for example) to duck score streaks altogether and equip six perks. This broader, more flexible system feels haphazard and prone to exploitation at first, but those suspicions dissipate almost entirely after just a couple of hours. This feels rigorously play-tested in ways that past games in the series often haven't, and while this is destined to be re-balanced and tinkered with pretty incessantly over the coming year – as is always the case with these games – it has been several years since a *Call Of Duty* debuted feeling as instantly taut and compelling as this.

It also feels uncharacteristically fair. Without the relevant booster perks enabled, almost all of your exo-suit abilities take the best part of a full second to deploy, and then last for (on average) around six seconds or less. This means that in the heat of a frenzied battle, most of your exo-suit tricks need to be pre-emptive rather than reactive, and senselessly bludgeoning your way to victory with a heavy shotgun has never been less easy to do. Sound design is also downright brilliant throughout, with the loud frothing of enemy boosters alerting you to assailants moving around behind you; another aspect that every player will quickly need to adapt to.

Needless to say, the maps have all been cleverly designed to exploit the verticality of the new combat system, and it's no surprise to note that the very best levels feel as if they have been torn straight from *Titanfall*. Retreat is a green mountainside resort in China's Guilin City that offers innumerable flip-points (via elements like destructible walkway panelling) between the three different plains, while Horizon offers up a very traditional-looking drone facility in the Icelandic highlands, which is embellished no end by the generous supply of sneaky open windows.

If *Advanced Warfare*'s multiplayer has one single overriding ace up its sleeve – and it does – it comes in the form of Uplink mode. An utterly hilarious (and ingenious) blast of blood-soaked basketball – with a drop of *Halo*'s Oddball thrown in – it's one of the few *Call Of Duty* game types that absolutely demands teamwork and relentless communication. *COD*'s resident loan wolves are likely to lose interest in it quickly; everyone else might find it hard to play anything else.

What's most surprising about *Advanced Warfare* is that the fundamentals of the multiplayer, the aspects that most people would expect to remain permanently unchanged, are where the real innovations have taken place this year. *Call Of Duty* is a lucrative sport as well as a dumbass solitary action game, and yet single player is where the staff at Sledgehammer Games (along with their cohorts at Raven Software) appear to be at their most circumspect and anxious. For many, this is going to be nothing less than a classic *Call Of Duty* game; a robust and imaginative multiplayer spread bolstered by elements which are almost custom-built to be ignored. If you play *Call Of Duty* online all year round then Christmas has officially come early. But if you're a sucker for the ludicrous, globe-trotting, re-skinned James Bond adventures that constitute these games in single player, you've picked the perfect year in which to take a twelve-month break.

Above: As superb as the motion capture is in *Advanced Warfare* we still found the performances a little bit of a let down overall. We were expected more from Spacey and co.

THE MULTIPLAYER FEELS RIGOROUSLY PLAY-TESTED IN WAYS THAT PAST GAMES IN THE SERIES OFTEN HAVEN'T

FAQs

Q. IS THERE SPLIT-SCREEN?
Yes. You can play local co-op in both Exo-Survival mode and in online multiplayer.

Q. COMING TO WII U?
No. This is the first *COD* since *Modern Warfare 2* that isn't launching on a Nintendo platform as well.

Q. CAN I PRACTICE ONLINE?
Yes. The Combat Readiness Program allows players to hone their skills online against teams of bots.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

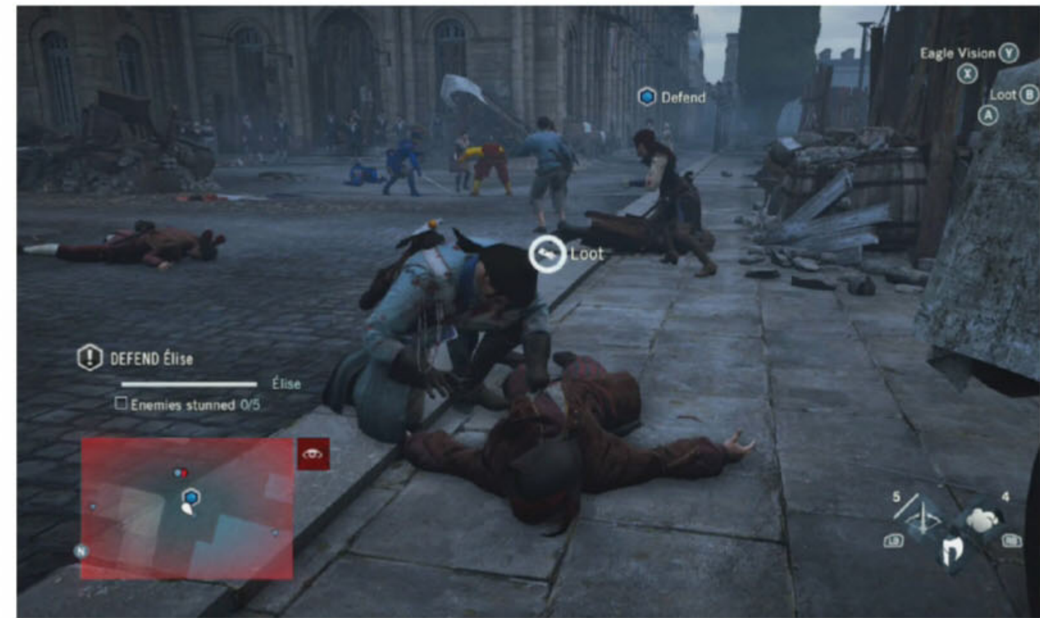
FASTER LAUNCHERS: Rocket launchers are now very unwieldy and slow on the draw, and dealing with UAVs and other aircraft is now a drawn-out and occasionally frustrating affair.

VERDICT 7/10
RESCUED BY FEARSOMELY GOOD MULTIPLAYER

THE PLOT THIS TIME IS EVEN MORE OFFHAND AND EPISODIC THAN USUAL, AND PROTAGONIST ARNO DORIAN IS A FULL-BLOWN DULLARD

INTO A BRICK WALL

As always, Ubisoft is claiming that free-running and traversal are sharper and more responsive than ever before… but this claim is unequivocal hyperbole. Running on rooftops is the same as it ever was, assisted by the mystifying fact that houses are now often joined at the hip by helpful white ropes. Nevertheless, bobbing between different viewpoints is quite spectacularly annoying, and it isn't always clear how you interact with the world in the way you intended to. Encountering an open window sometimes forms a prompt for you to press the left trigger in order to enter it (even though that mostly just causes you to duck) and quickly descending a tall building will force you to loot a corpse if there happens to be one nearby. A mastery over your environment demands a mastery over a very sketchy world too.





LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, CATASTROPHÉ

Assassin's Creed: Unity

DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Ignoring the near-cataclysmic abundance of ruinous bugs and foibles – more on those in a minute – how you end up feeling about *Assassin's Creed: Unity* is likely to depend on how you feel about *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag.* That game, with its morally ambiguous protagonist, novel loot-diving system and riveting seafaring combat, felt to many like the smartest and richest game in the series by a sea mile. Conversely, a very vocal community of hardcore buffs immediately deemed it to be a franchise low point; with the emphasis on vehicular combat diluting the appeal of what is mostly a very standardised string of action games.

It speaks volumes about how seismic *Black Flag* felt last year that *Assassin's Creed: Unity* already feels like a throwback. The rousing naval conflict has disappeared certainly, but so too have some of the flashier hand-to-hand combat manoeuvres, which, to be fair, were basically superhuman anyway. The combat here is as blunt as some of the weaponry that you wield, and the straightforward attack, parry and dodge commands are barely amplified by the game's numerous progression structures.

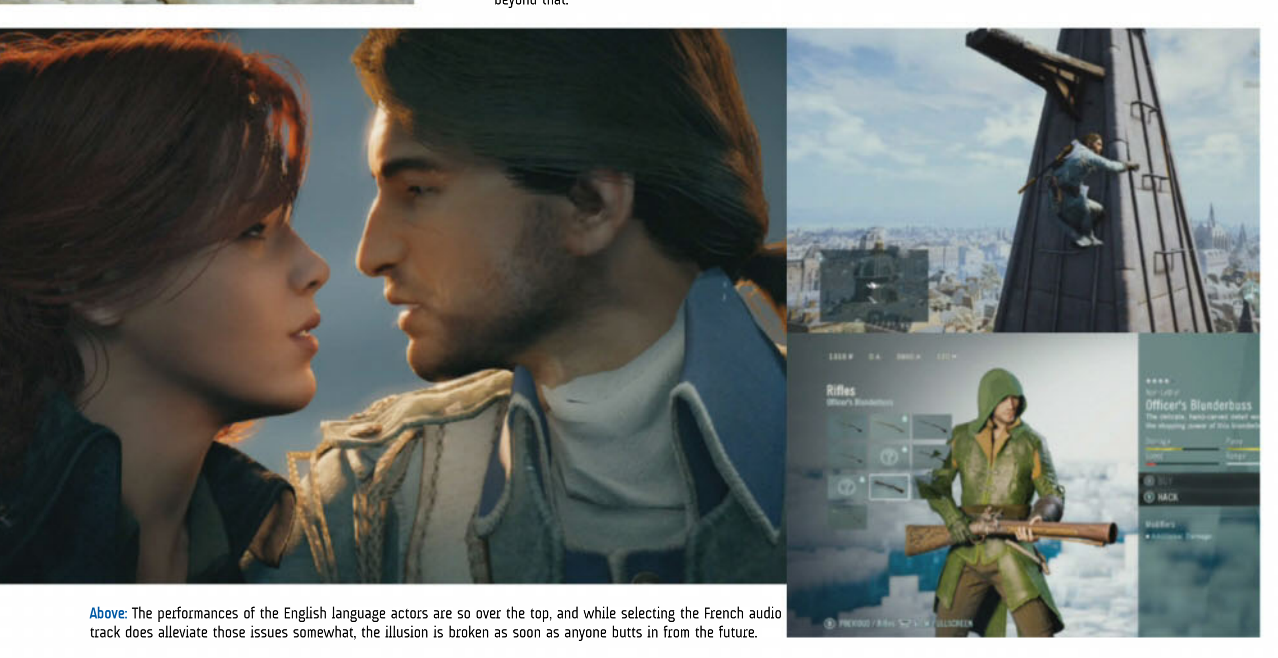
Much has already been written about the reasonably well detailed recreation of Ancien Régime-era Paris, but it's a lifeless kaleidoscopic effigy rather than a place that actually feels palpable. For all of the hundreds of disgruntled citizens littering the streets, and the brand new (though rather trivial) emergent Crowd Events that pop up periodically, the actual gameplay never grafts to pull you into that universe. *Assassin's Creed III*, for all of its many flaws, began with you being unwittingly flung into a braying mob of people headed straight for City Hall; provoking the brilliantly uneasy feeling that you were stuck in the middle of a community of people who were about to reach an unmanageable boiling point. If history isn't your strong suit, *Unity* won't even inspire you to ask any questions about who these people are

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DIFFICULTY LEVEL: To *Unity's* credit, the difficulty ratings do feel carefully maintained. Rather than bobbing along without offering players a great amount of challenge, *Unity's* difficulty ratings do actually signify the degree of hardship that you face.

Left: The emergent Crowd Events are laughably repetitive. Kill these two thugs. Tackle this thief. They never expand beyond that.



Above: The performances of the English language actors are so over the top, and while selecting the French audio track does alleviate those issues somewhat, the illusion is broken as soon as anyone butts in from the future.



Left: The vast multitude of costumes and clothing aren't merely cosmetic. Everything comes with valuable modifiers, allowing you to do things like curb detection times, grant additional HP, prolong the duration of your disguises and so on.

or what they're doing: those boisterous hordes are simply unimportant.

Regardless, the plot this time is even more offhand and episodic than usual, and protagonist Arno Dorian is a full-blown dullard. There's consistent chatter about a murderous conspiracy punctuated by goofball interludes featuring Arno's sort-of-girlfriend Élise de la Serre, but there's less narrative momentum here than there ever has been. Of 2014's unprecedented duo of full-scale *Assassin's Creed* adventures, it's surprising to note that the game with the bigger budget – and the one with the heavyweight marketing fanfare – feels like the project that was handed down to the journeymen C-squad for a quick buck. This is a collection of sequences and scenes that simply do not belong together, and only the sharpest human minds will be capable of playing through the (almost completely incoherent) second half in anything other than a catatonic stupor.

What's even worse is that the sci-fi element is shoehorned in so flippantly that the developers appear to have forgotten about it midway through production. Although you're darting around time and interacting with glitches in the Animus throughout the story, the finale doesn't reference any part of it… until Rebecca Crane's voice suddenly appears on the soundtrack as the end credits roll, to hurriedly explain that you did an excellent job, and see you again, and goodbye for now. The near-future narrative of *Assassin's Creed* has always been its least interesting facet, but what constitutes a framing device here is three or four brief cutscenes plus a final monologue that doesn't make a lick of sense. That futuristic stuff has always been something of a cop-out anyway, so why did Ubisoft even bother to include it here?

The terribly uninteresting plot also keeps senselessly repeating itself for the sake of the gameplay. You're launched, time after time, into a hugely over-populated environment, given a few lame opportunities to manipulate the situation (by bribing a cleaning lady into opening a window, for example) and asked to assassinate a character surrounded by suspicious foot soldiers. Although you're taught to believe otherwise, when you're uncovered you are basically dead; there are just too many enemies and they just move too quickly. Auto-saving is unbelievably erratic too, logging your progress every few seconds in some situations, and basically never doing at all in others. But the real problem is the aforementioned abundance of enemy assailants. Being detected triggers what is tantamount to an unofficial fail state, and trying to outrun more than twenty pursuers is practically impossible; regardless of whether you're in a wide open foyer or trying to navigate your way around a banal labyrinth of corridors. Nothing is more irritating in a stealth game than sudden, inexplicable failure, and *AC: Unity* strives to convince players that such things are non-existent here. Which is not true.

Whichever way you look at it, this is way, way below series par. During the campaign, you don't partake in a single one of those lifeless eavesdrop missions, but the entire game is perpetually rote and snail-paced; as if paying tribute to their memory. The uncommonly tedious side missions are so ludicrous in their prosperity that the cluttered map is almost impossible to navigate at points. And the narrative has all of the pith and conviction of a perplexed shrug.

BEING DETECTED TRIGGERS WHAT IS TANTAMOUNT TO AN UNOFFICIAL FAIL STATE

FAQs

Q. HOW'S THE MULTIPLAYER?
Non-existent. After building competitive multiplayer into something truly brilliant last year, Ubisoft decided to ditch it altogether.

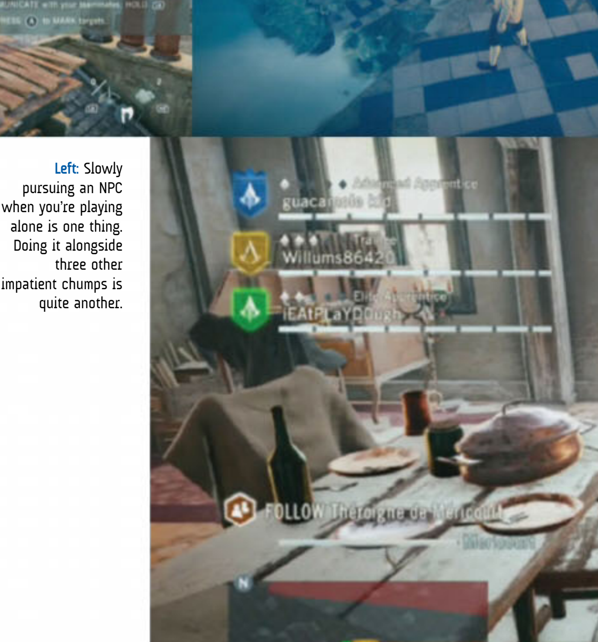
Q. WHAT ABOUT CO-OP?
The co-op levels are not integral to the main plot (despite what everyone has been led to believe) and they're just plain dull anyway.

Q. CAN YOU STILL RATE MISSIONS?
Yes. Every time you finish a mission, you can rate it out of five and feed straight back to the publisher.



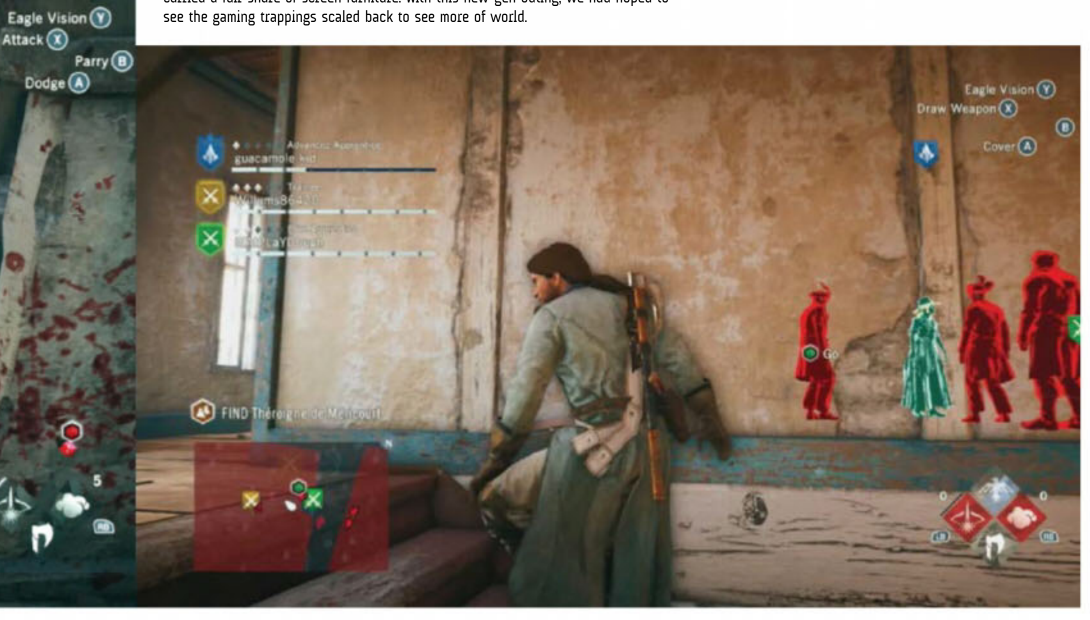
Right: In co-op you have access to different active skills. You can heal your group, share Eagle Vision, wear a disguise etc. The co-op missions are so simple that you can ignore all of those things.





Left: Slowly pursuing an NPC when you're playing alone is one thing. Doing it alongside three other impatient chumps is quite another.

Below: The HUD for *Unity* feels incredibly cluttered, even for a series that has always carried a fair share of screen furniture. With this new-gen outing, we had hoped to see the gaming trappings scaled back to see more of world.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

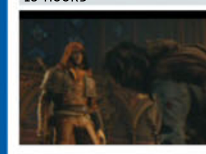
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



Oh my lord. This is the worst triple-A game ever released. *Battlefield 4*, *Driver 3*, you name it… this takes the cake. A headache in every possible sense of the word.

10 HOURS



The campaign ends in a haze of lame QTEs and narrative confusion, and the credits roll alongside some dialogue, recorded presumably because the writers forgot to wrap the plot up. Shocking.

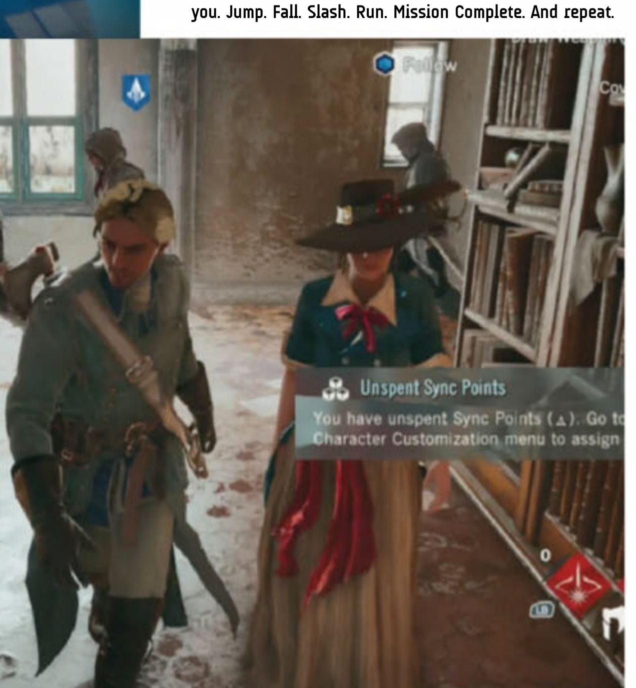
3 DAYS



Sadly, the brilliant multiplayer modes are gone, and so is Wolf Pack. What replaces them is a handful of staggeringly boring co-op missions that are better tackled on your own.

WHITHER THE WOLF PACK?

Although for some reason Ubisoft never, ever shouted about it, *Black Flag* and *ACIII* contained a fantastic co-operative game mode called Wolf Pack. All you ever did in Wolf Pack was synchronise kills and rush between targets as a pair, a threesome or a foursome, but it was impossibly exciting at times; brilliantly towing the line between delicate stealth gameplay, and frenzied time attack hustling. Not only does Wolf Pack mode not feature in *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, the co-op gameplay that replaces it, the co-op gameplay that has been touted as *Unity*'s main reason for being, is so badly constructed that thoughtful, coordinated play is never demanded of you. Jump. Fall. Slash. Run. Mission Complete. And repeat.



If all of this wasn't enough, *Unity* has launched in a state that is plainly and simply unacceptable. The aesthetic wrinkles aren't even that much of a problem; some of them are even funny. The appalling frame-rate, which occasionally drops to below fifteen headache-inducing frames-per-second, becomes less of an issue as the game progresses, although it's unclear whether that's the game improving or simple acclimatisation. And if you're being really generous (saintly, even) you could argue that when elements pop in and out during crowd scenes – be they textures, hats or even people's faces – it actually strengthens the plot, in which the Animus has been hacked and is slowly becoming steadily more unstable.

But here is what else you'll need to deal with. Trinkets that instantly cause you to fail if you try to collect them during a mission. Vital audio cues clipping out when you sprint. Leaps from buildings onto pavements that turn into impromptu trips to the centre of the digital earth. A jet black loading screen that appears with alarming regularity and hangs around for thirty seconds each time. Ground level scenery that can't be detached from if you happen to scale it. A needlepoint lock picking minigame rendered impossible via input lag. And so on.

Battlefield 4 deserves to be invoked here. Ubisoft has promised to remedy some of these problems with a patch in due course, but that patch isn't going to be about adding polish; it's going to be about making the thing function properly, and actually work in the first place.

In addition to putting the game out unfinished, Ubisoft also unceremoniously pushes its luck elsewhere. The series' traditional loot chests are now colour-coded, and opening around 70% of them involves inanely jumping through hoops at Ubi's behest. Some of them demand that you play the utterly inane browser game *Assassin's Creed: Initiates*. Others demand that you play with the utterly inane companion app, while other unlocks – weapons, costumes, you name it – are similarly held back for those with a frankly terrifying amount of leisure time on their hands. That said, if you ever start running low on Helix points – the currency that's used to buy upgrades and access certain parts of the map among other things – do not panic. You can buy those with real money if need be.

Assassin's Creed never felt like a series that could withstand a new instalment once a year, but it's a gleaming testament to the invention and ingenuity of everyone at Ubisoft that they managed to make it work for this long. It really has been a pretty stunning tightrope walk up until now. But if *Black Flag* was a self-contained explosion of quick-witted brilliance, *Assassin's Creed: Unity* is nowt but wreckage. Stand aside.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SIDE-QUESTS: The Nostradamus Enigma missions are a spread of unusual side missions. They're centred around wordplay and riddles, and make for a nice (and faintly hardcore) change of pace.

VERDICT 4/10
A DIM AND SLIPSHOD CALAMITY

RATHER CONFORMIST FOR A REBEL

Assassin's Creed: Rogue

It's a shame Ubisoft didn't put its full weight behind this idea, because it could have been something great. There are hints of the potential of *Assassin's Creed: Rogue* all the way through the game. Small moments of clarity where playing as a Templar reveals something interesting about the age-old conflict that this series has been chronicling for years. But *Rogue* carries too much of the baggage of older games and is too heavily tied to the mechanics and trappings of our assassin adventures to stand on its own two feet to make something of itself. As we came to the end of its relatively brief campaign we really just wished it could have found something unique to say.

The promise of Shay Patrick Cormac, a fallen Assassin who joins the Templars and begins hunting his former allies is a great headline pitch. It's got drama and tension between characters; there's betrayal, intrigue, and people dealing with conflicting ideals inherent, but that doesn't really come across in the final game. Shay goes from cocky, Irish scallywag with all the stereotypical laddish chatter of beer and women to being a principled, caring Templar in a matter of a couple of scenes. It brings a grey veil over the divide between Assassin and Templar which is nice, but it's not explored with any clarity. Does Shay believe in Templar control or just stopping his former colleagues from making more mistakes like the one that forced him to betray them in the first place? We never really get the answer to that question or enough evidence to divine it for ourselves.

Below: *Rogue* doesn't add huge amounts to what you would have experienced with *Black Flag* last year and doesn't really explore the Templar Order's philosophy in a way that makes it particularly compelling for the future.



DETAILS

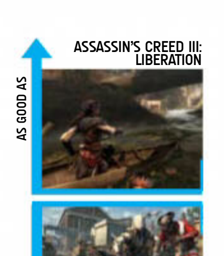
- FORMAT: PS3
- OTHER FORMATS: PC, 360
- ORIGIN: Bulgaria
- PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
- DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Sofia
- PRICE: £39.99
- RELEASE: Out now
- PLAYERS: 1
- ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

WHILE THE CONTENT FEELS TOO SIMILAR TO THE GAME WE PLAYED A YEAR AGO, THE REAL ISSUES WITH ROGUE ARE MORE FUNDAMENTAL

What playing as a Templar does do is give some elements of the game a new twist. For instance, fighting Assassins is a tricky business as we've been able to demonstrate in previous games. In New York, agents will be waiting in long grass, sitting on benches and hiding in cubby-holes waiting to pounce on you. A mechanic of hushed whispers (like when Frodo puts the ring on) warns you someone is close and *Rogue* uses the directional dial for marking potential threats you'll be used to from playing *Creed* online. Finding and striking these enemies before they get you is actually a nice new element.

There's also plenty of content as the chance to explore New York and the North Atlantic remains rich with possibility. The trouble is, it's content you've seen before. There's all the hunting and sailing to be done, but it's for its own ends and ultimately you're not in this game long enough to justify doing it all. It doesn't bring anything particularly important to the table other than its own enjoyment.

While the plot may be a little undercooked and the content feels too similar to the game we played a year ago, the real issues with *Rogue* are more fundamental than that. This game is far more buggy that it ought to be for a triple-A product on consoles that have been in developer's hands for the best part of nine years. Not buggy to the point of being broken, but buggy to the point of being ridiculous. Buggy to the point of having the lead character in a rictus grin during a cutscene or floating off in the distance when he's supposed to be in a conversation. Buggy to the point of the geometry tearing in the final mission and the game crashing. Buggy but not broken.



And then there's the performances and characters you get to spend your time with. We're getting to play as the Templars for the first time, but these are some of the least interesting personalities in the series. We applaud Ubisoft Sofia for not going down the



LOST IN TRANSIT

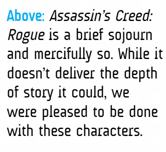
What happened to *Assassin's Creed*'s groundbreaking character movement and animation through crowds? We ask because we noticed a distinct lack of interaction and nuance to how Shay navigates the world in *Rogue*. When Altaïr first started twisting his body to squeeze past civilians, placing his hand on their shoulders it blew our minds. Shay moves stiffly and when he meets NPCs he pretty much stops dead. Did putting on the cloak of a Templar mean he now has to refuse to give way to other pedestrians? We can't really work it out, but the subtlety of what made these Assassins so interesting to move around the world has been lost a little and it reduces Rogue to being just another open-world action game.

FAQs

Q. WHAT DOES IT DO THAT'S NEW?
There are a couple of new weapons, such as the air rifle, and you're fighting Assassins now, who are a tricky bunch.

Q. IS IT A BROKEN MESS?
No, but it's not as polished as it could be. Given that it appears to be largely built on last year's game that's disappointing.

Q. HOW BIG OF A GAME IS IT?
There are fewer story missions than we've seen in some *Assassin's Creed* games, but there's plenty to explore.



Above: *Assassin's Creed: Rogue* is a brief sojourn and mercifully so. While it doesn't deliver the depth of story it could, we were pleased to be done with these characters.

Above: The new air rifle gives you some more ranged attack options such as firing sleep and berserk darts. Setting off a bear with a berserk dart to attack nearby soldiers was a lot of fun, but isn't something you get to do too often.

pantomime villain route and creating demons for companions, but a little personality could still have been applied. We've been fighting against these guys for seven years and now we finally get to hear their side of the story in a more concentrated form, but we're no clearer really. If anything it waters down the conflict to a two-party system of politics. One believes in big government, the other small. This used to be an interesting battle, but *Rogue* turns it into a by-election. It's not helped by some of the voice acting performances, which while not painting its characters as arch-caricatures still has them close to the stage. It's very hard to care about the Templars, Assassins or Shay when we'd much rather they all just shut up.

And it's a shame, because when it's good, *Assassin's Creed: Rogue* can go from the excruciating to the exhilarating. Some chase sequences in particular stand out as highlights as you dash through collapsing scenes to escape. It's all heavily scripted and controlled, but it's well done and reminiscent of some of our favourite *Uncharted 2* setpieces. There's still a lack of emergent moments for the player to express themselves and create their own fun, but there's some light breaking through the cracks of this game.

Somewhere beneath the threadbare cloak *Rogue* is wearing, last year's far superior title exists and as such it's not a disaster, but a missed opportunity seemingly not given enough time. Since this has so much in common with *Black Flag*, the bones of this game remain entertaining enough, but it lacks enough originality to be more than small distraction. With multiplayer dropped from this game too, that gives it even less of a lifespan.

MISSING LINK

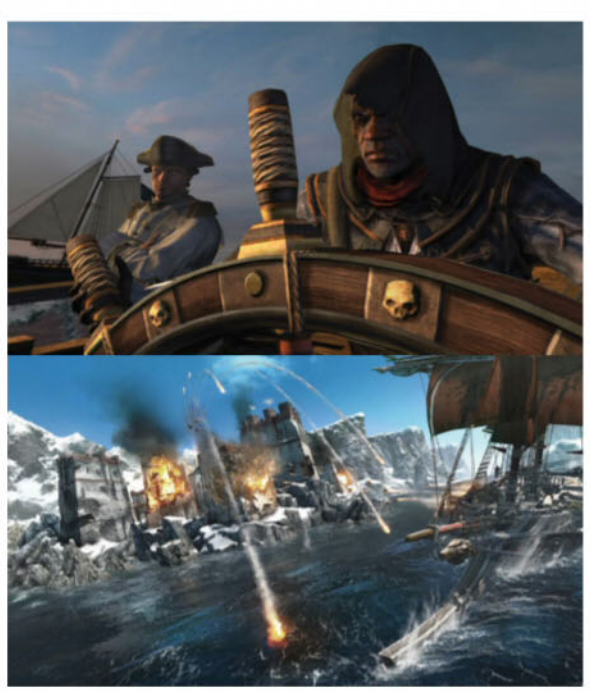
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

STANDING ALONE: While playing as a Templar was a good idea on paper, *Rogue* lacks enough of its own identity to stand alone as a concept. This could have been a new spin-off, but it needs more charisma.



VERDICT 6/10

THE HEADLINE PITCH IS STRONGER THAN THE DELIVERY



Above: Fortress battles offer a slightly different tactical challenge, but play a fairly limited role in the story for *Rogue*. We were only tasked with taking out one as part of the plot so the others were just for our own amusement.

NO FIGHTING IN THE WAR ROOM

The titular Inquisition might feel a bit silly if this grand entity of Truth and Justice was just a party of four miscreants running around stealing gold from people's houses and battering giant spiders, which is probably why BioWare introduced the war room element to this game. It acts as both a world map and a way to pick up new equipment or spread the Inquisition's influence, with actions requiring power to carry out. Power is earned by completing missions in the game proper, meaning if you want to pick up the most influence possible – and as such get the best out of your otherwise rather ragtag Inquisition – you're going to need to put the hours in throughout Thedas. A simple, but effective element.



Right: If you knock the difficulty down to its lowest level – as with other BioWare RPGs – it's easy enough to enjoy the game almost as a choose-your-own-adventure experience. Just hold the right trigger to win every fight.

NOBODY EXPECTED IT TO BE THIS GOOD

Dragon Age: Inquisition

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: BioWare
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 21 November (US: 18 November)
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

DRAGON AGE II



AS GOOD AS



DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

It turns out the age-old claim of developers listening to the fans isn't a complete crock of mabari dung, if *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is anything to go by. For a long while now we've been hearing that the team at BioWare had taken on board feedback from a vociferous community – but it's very easy, and rather logical, to dismiss said claim as just more marketing bunkum; the kind of claptrap spouted by any company on a PR offensive. In actuality, it feels good to be proven wrong.

Dragon Age: Inquisition has the eyes of the RPG-loving world on it, and as such, it's going to come under fire from certain quarters. It won't be perfect. It simply *can't* be perfect. And yet, this third entry in BioWare's love letter to the world of dungeons and/or dragons is going to prove a lot of doubters wrong. It's not a masterclass in RPG-making, but it's an extremely good game – and it's sure to silence a lot of the critics of *Dragon Age II*.

Set in the aftermath of the events of the second game, *Inquisition*'s main plot point is – if we're talking basic terms here – a big green hole in the sky, causing demons to appear all over the continent of Thedas. There's a lot going on in and around this central concern, though, and there is a bit of assumed knowledge from how the story is presented, with countless codex entries (books, journals, the usual lark) spread around to get new players up to speed. Sadly, if you've no idea what the issues with the Chantry are, or why some people are against mages being made tranquil, you might find that there's quite a lot to get to grips with here. The main arc, however, is straightforward enough – and everyone understands the 'you are the chosen one, save the world' vibe, even if it is as derivative as they come.

The 'you' in question is, thankfully, a matter of more choice than it has ever been in the series, with players able to choose from multiple classes, four races – including the warrior race of the Qunari for the first time – and male or female for each. Just like in the original game, choosing a particular race can see different reactions from NPCs you encounter – a nice touch and something that does manage to draw you in that little bit more, even if it is just because of an off-hand insult from somebody about your grey skin and your horns.

The other expected elements of choice return too, though *Inquisition* does still suffer from them being rather binary in its 'do this or that' presentation. Relationships are a lot better in how they're handled, though, with the actions and words chosen by the player having constant, rolling effects on how they are perceived by other members in the party. Think Telltale's *Walking Dead* and you're on the right tracks. Even so, it's hard to do anything but chuckle at sex scenes in the game in a post-*Saints Row 4* world, in which the lampooning was so fiercely effective. Those individuals in your party, even when you aren't trying to romance them, are great to be around – Varric especially is a welcome return, and there's a real panache to Dorian's dialogue and delivery that almost forces you to keep him in the party as much as possible. Or maybe it's just the moustache.

Still, even with genuine progress made in both how elements work and are presented, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* doesn't carry itself as a particularly current-gen game. It looks great, no doubt, but there are plenty of elements that look out of place and decidedly last gen. Some texture work isn't the finest, for example, and facial animation (while lip syncing is a lot better) leaves a lot to be desired. It also suffers from the same problems both previous games did, with stilted, awkward cut-scene animation and multi-person dialogue not flowing as smoothly as it should. There was a

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

KEEPING BUSY: It won't take 72 hours to walk the map end to end, but the continent of Thedas has a lot more to explore – and do – than in previous *Dragon Age* games.

IT'S TO BIOWARE'S CREDIT THAT IT HAS PUT TOGETHER A COMBAT SYSTEM OFFERING TWO LEGITIMATE WAYS OF APPROACHING A FIGHT

Below: Thankfully, *Inquisition*'s dungeons aren't the copy-paste efforts of 2011 – they're all individually crafted, meaning each one has cool little incidental touches to discover. All of which contributes to a much stronger atmosphere and sense of place.

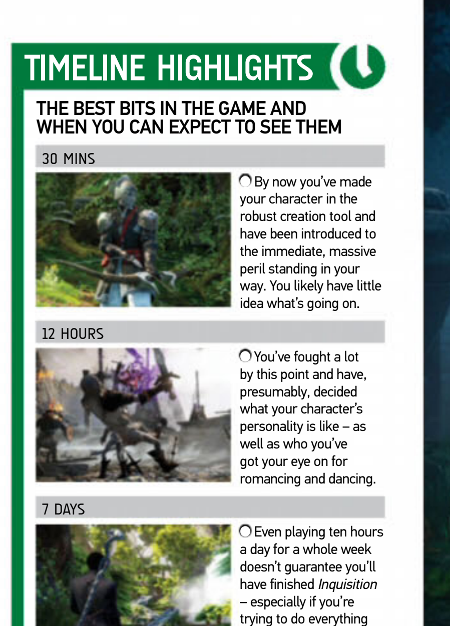


Above: Strategic combat is there for any player who wants to indulge in it, and the tactical camera works well enough that it almost feels like a demi-RTS.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM



30 MINS

By now you've made your character in the robust creation tool and have been introduced to the immediate, massive peril standing in your way. You likely have little idea what's going on.

12 HOURS

You've fought a lot by this point and have, presumably, decided what your character's personality is like – as well as who you've got your eye on for romancing and dancing.

7 DAYS

Even playing ten hours a day for a whole week doesn't guarantee you'll have finished *Inquisition* – especially if you're trying to do everything you can… Which you should be.

distinct issue in Origins, with characters meaning to cut each other off in, say, an argument, but only managing to have one character stop talking and a second later the other interrupts. Five years ago it was something you could overlook – now you can still overlook it, but you get a bit miffed it's even an issue. Size, scale and fantastic scenery are all present and correct, but honestly, *Inquisition* isn't the greatest representative of the new generation of machines we've seen.

That said, even though it's not the shiniest of the shiny games, there's still an overall atmosphere and sense of it being a big production that will draw you in to *Inquisition*. The scale is easily up there in the realms of epic for the series, and given a bit of time for it to bed in and for your brain to start intentionally overlooking a bit of jankiness here and there, you'll be totally drawn in. Just like both previous *Dragon Age* games, then.

One way in which you're drawn in is thanks to the freedom the player is offered – the developers previously spoke of looking to *Skyrim* for influence, and it shows. *Inquisition* isn't as massive as Bethesda's epic, but there's certainly the ability to go off the beaten track and simply explore for the sake of exploration (or for the sake of picking elfroot) that hasn't been there before in the series. The fact that almost everywhere you go there's something to do and a new mission to take on just makes it all the more engrossing, though more on that later.

The fights we were presented with in the last two games couldn't have been much more different – they were an area of concern for many players, and fairly so. So it's not too surprising to say that combat in *Inquisition* is at a midpoint between *Origins* and *Dragon Age II*, reintroducing the tactical camera (or introducing it for the first time on console, at least) while at the same time, offering similar input/action-based battles of the second game. Fortunately it's been slowed down a notch from *DAII* and it doesn't rely on button bashing (instead you can just hold the trigger to attack), so even when you're not using the Tactical mode, it will at least feel that bit more cerebral than last time around.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CH-CH-CHANGES: In *Dragon Age II* you saw a lot of recycled dungeons and it genuinely felt as if nothing you did mattered. Fortunately, *Inquisition* changes that – and all for the better.

However, a quick press of a button pops the camera up above the battlefield and pauses time, allowing you to issue orders to your team of four. You can start and stop time as you please, allowing a… Well, *tactical* approach to combat – something that can be harnessed to great effect in bigger boss battles, for example. The thing is, it isn't essential, and in fact feels a mite superfluous on console, with all battles easy enough to keep track of in regular, direct-control fashion.

Below: That green thing at the top-right is a rift. You'll be closing down a lot of those thanks to your magical Chosen One powers.







A matter of choice

You can't import saves from the previous two *Dragon Age* games into *Inquisition*, but BioWare offers an alternative to keep your choices alive – or to make new ones if you felt you made a mistake previously. Logging in to Dragon Age Keep (www.dragonagekeep.com), players can go through the entire history of choices from *Origins* and *DAII* in order to set up the world exactly how they want it to be for *Inquisition*'s beginning. Export it from the site and it will appear as a selectable World State when starting a new game. It also opens up the ability – with multiple World State slots available – to have different playthroughs with different setups. Frankly, that's a lot better than save imports.



Left: *Inquisition's* cast of characters is a solid one, though we harbour a particular fondness for Varric, Dorian and the northern Sera.

Right: While some elements leave you thinking you're playing a last-gen game, there are times when *Inquisition* takes your breath away.



Above: We hadn't seen the last-gen versions at the time of writing, but they're expected to be exactly the same game, just with poorer visuals and loading times.

On PC this will likely be a different story, with the interface lending itself much better to mouse-and-keyboard control. It's not particularly an issue, but it is something worth pointing out – the fact that we almost forgot the Tactical mode existed after a dozen hours, thanks to the fact we had only felt the need to use it once, early on in the game. As long as you aren't a micro-managing maniac and can keep half an eye on the statuses of your party, you'll be fine without it – but to be fair, that's to BioWare's credit that it has put together a combat system that does successfully offer two legitimate, very different ways of approaching a fight.

That blending spreads elsewhere too, with *Dragon Age: Inquisition* bringing together elements not only from the series itself and the wider RPG genre, but also – rather obviously – borrowing a fair bit from Ubisoft's school of design, as well as the understandable *Skyrim* influences. You'll end up in one of a few large regions ('large' may be an understatement) with a single main goal taking you there – talk to someone about a thing, go to a place and blah de blah – but almost as soon as you arrive, your quest list will double and redouble.

FAQs

Q. IS IT DUMBED DOWN?
That's a loaded question. It has similarities to *DAII*, which some claimed was dumbed down, but it draws a lot from the much-loved original too.

Q. DO I SEE HORSES?
Yes, you do. Your mounts are available in most areas, though to be honest, they're not a huge amount of use.

Q. RETURNING CHARACTERS?
All over the place, yes. Some appear as party members, like Varric, while other folks just pop up in small cameo roles.

INQUISITION'S MAIN PLOT POINT IS – IF WE'RE TALKING BASIC TERMS HERE – A BIG GREEN HOLE IN THE SKY

There's always something to do; always a new mission unlocking somewhere; a new fetch quest or rifts to seal; a new region to explore or camp to set up. *Inquisition* never stops keeping you busy, and it's this sort of design – the kind we've seen in the likes of *Assassin's Creed IV* and *Far Cry 3* – that makes it so compelling. You can rush through if you like, as very few of the missions are mandatory, but it's all there to be done – and a lot of it is a case of as and when you feel like it. Or as and when you're powerful enough. Yes, there are places in each region that are much higher level than you will be when you first get to them, and you'll get your backside unceremoniously handed to you when a random dragon appears and rains down its fiery wrath on your party, wiping them all out in one blast. It's not that *Inquisition* is on a par with *Dark Souls* when it comes to difficulty, it's just a way – *another* way – that BioWare is listening to the fans. The satisfaction when you are suitably levelled up and return to those areas… We can see why people miss it in games. Man, that's some satisfying stuff.

In fact, the general feeling from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is one of satisfaction and – dare we say it – it actually takes us back to one of BioWare's all time greats, *Knights Of The Old Republic*. There's just an air of confidence, wonder and discovery that hasn't been present – at least not in this way – for a number of years now, and it will be wonderfully pleasing to anyone who has stuck with BioWare through the peaks and troughs.

Having said that, it's something of a blessing in disguise that *Dragon Age II* was made how it was and received in the way that it was. Without it, there wouldn't have been the backlash, and without that we wouldn't have seen BioWare take a step back and figure out what exactly it needed to do in order to make things great again. It's thanks to the massive misstep of the first sequel that we've ended up with quite possibly one of the great RPGs of recent years.

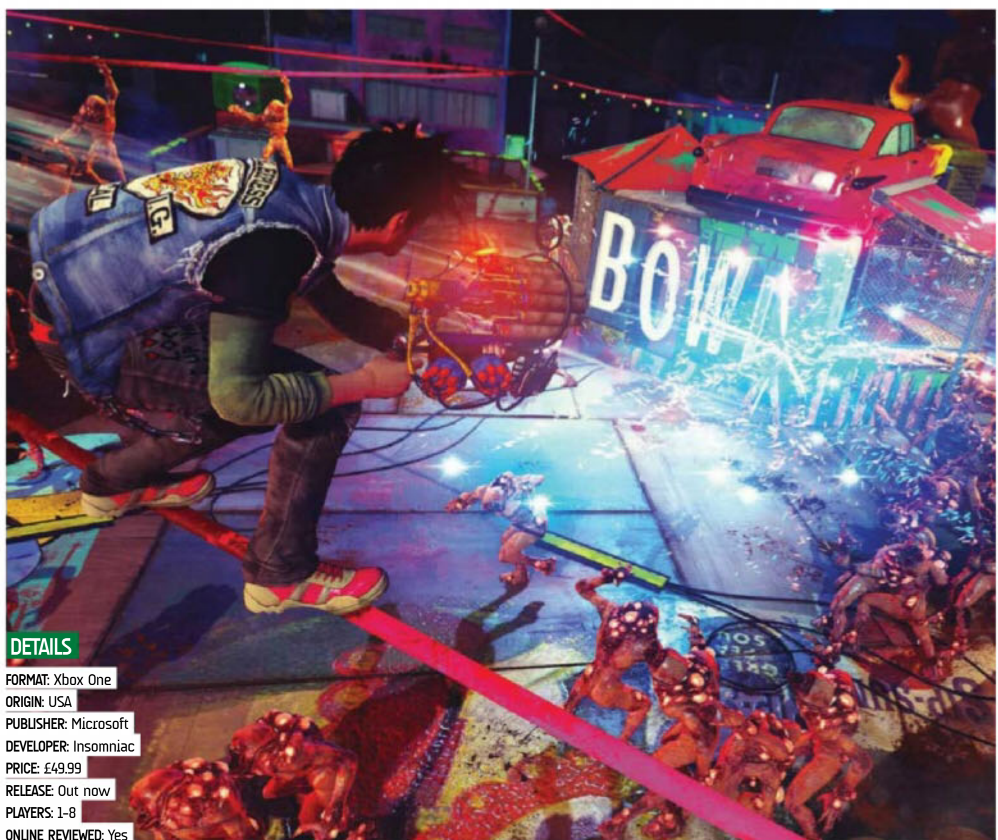
It might not be the greatest example of the current generation's power, nor is it an exercise in reinvention and uniqueness – but when you've sunk 50 hours into *Inquisition* and hardly realised, *and* you still want to play it for another 50 hours, then you know you're onto something good. This time the fans get what they want – and apparently what they wanted was very good indeed.

VERDICT 8/10
AN EPIC, IF DERIVATIVE, RETURN TO FORM

WHAT ONCE WAS FIZZY… IS NOW FLAT

Sunset Overdrive

Below: Staying above the action rewards you with speedier access to your Amps, meaning you can rain death down on the OD with deadly deftness, wiping them out even quicker than you otherwise could.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Insomniac
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

***Sunset Overdrive* would have been cool in the late Eighties/ early Nineties, back in the day when game designers were giving their characters skateboards and 'radical' tattoos to try and make them relevant to a predominately male, teenage audience.** Now, *Sunset Overdrive* feels like it's trying too hard, like it's just wandered into a Subway full of teenagers at 4am saying 'Yo dudes, come see what this rad cat's pimpin''. It's embarrassing. To use a phrase from the game's own vernacular: it's *straight buggin*'.

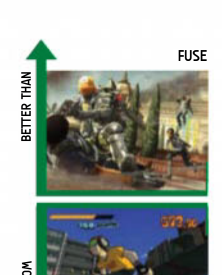
And that's a shame, because despite some of the most obnoxious humour to ever come out of a triple-A games release, *Sunset* offers some interesting gameplay. It takes a good six or seven hours to penetrate the dense tutorial, but once you're over the initial hump, the game opens up its rich arsenal of madness and traversal and turns into something different. It's a chimera of the later *Tony Hawk* games, a little bit of *Jet Set Radio Future*, and a healthy dose of *Ratchet & Clank*. That sounds like a recipe for success, but actually comes out feeling underwhelming, slow-burning and cumbersome.

The gunplay of the game is unbalanced, to start – yes, the array of weapons on offer will make any *Conker's Bad Fur Day* fan salivate, and the way each weapon handles is a credit to Insomniac's imagination and programming skills… but they all feel redundant after you upgrade a weapon with good splash damage to its highest level. That's the problem with the Amps system *Sunset Overdrive* uses as a centrifuge – think of the Amps as perks, two equipable to your protagonist, one to your weapon, one to your roll and one to your jump. This means – in theory – every single move you make and shot you fire has the potential to chain into a mess of projectiles and area-of-effect explosions.

But it's a mess. Once you're fully loaded and you've got the Dirty Harry gun kitted out to the nines (which will take you at the most five hours) you can just hop around raining destruction on everything. The game starts off incredibly slow, and we had huge issues with the distance of the camera from the player and the airy controls making everything feel sluggish, but it does speed up as you unlock new abilities… but it all just feels so redundant when you can just bounce up and down on the pagodas of Little Tokyo or the obnoxious inflatables near The Oxfords' pizzeria HQ.

ONCE YOU'RE OVER THE INITIAL HUMP, THE GAME OPENS UP ITS RICH ARSENAL OF MADNESS AND TRAVERSAL AND TURNS INTO SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Aside from the Romero's zombie-like OD (afflicted by drinking too much energy drink – oh, the satire!) and the various bandit-class enemies littering the city, you'll bump into a selection of factions that offer different missions and rewards. The factions themselves are populated exclusively by unlikable idiots, the writers of the game sacrificing any kind of character development or attempt at empathy with crowbarred jokes and needless insults. The missions they offer are standard 'Go here, do this' fare, mostly glorified fetch quests. The only desire to engage with them comes from the Amps or rewards they could offer, but even that fails to spur you on once you've got a good setup.



BETTER THAN: FUSE

WORSE THAN: JET SET RADIO FUTURE

The game really does start to show its core a little later on – to its credit, we found ourselves neglecting the fast-travel system in favour of jetting everywhere ourselves, and the sheer amount of quests and collectibles dotted around the city will get completionists frothing at the mouth. If the game was *just* about shooting, it'd be a bore – boring into your head with how boring it is – but it's not: the traversal salvages what would otherwise be one of the most obnoxious and out-dated games released in recent years and makes it at least passably valid.

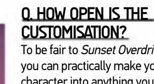
CHAOS GEM?

The single-player component is only one part of *Sunset*'s vision – the co-op side actually works a lot better and shows off the powerful engine humming beneath the hood much better than the solo experience. You can play in up to teams of eight, unlocking new cosmetic items, weapons and Amps as you progress. The practically uncountable level of enemies hurled your way and the frantic, clawing-for-your-life gameplay Chaos Mode promotes beats the core game in terms of fun with ease, and the dynamic way you have to progress through the chaotic campaign is innovative; players eking out their own path of objectives, juicing themselves up before a stupendous showdown with a nightmarish horde at the end of the campaign. If you get a chance to try this before you decide whether to get *Sunset Overdrive*, you should.

FAQs

Q. WILL IT LIVE UP TO THE HYPE?
It depends how much you want to get out of the game – it's certainly not going to be the Xbox One's killer app, that's for sure.

Q. CAN I SHOOT A BEAR STUFFED WITH TNT?
Yes, you can. Or fire a mascot balloon filled with acid. Or deploy robot cats that seek and destroy. Or wield a gun that looks like a phallus. Yeah.



Q. HOW OPEN IS THE CUSTOMISATION?
To be fair to *Sunset Overdrive*, you can practically make your character into anything you want. Ours was part furry, part Samurai, for example.



Left: Some of the weapons are better than others, but you can't argue with the excitement of detonating a nuclear warhead in the midst of an OD horde

Above: The characters are all vapid and pointless and we couldn't wait for the (unskippable!) cutscenes to finish.

The world design reminds us oddly of *Sonic The Hedgehog*, believe it or not - the game rewards you for bouncing high and soaring over the myriad obstacles littering the city floor, whilst punishing you for falling. It's an old idea redefined, and it's similarly fun.

The game itself flirts with the idea of being metafictional and self-aware, ironically seemingly unaware that doing so requires some degree of subtlety and tact to create a clever subversion of these ideas. Instead of presenting a smile and a nod to games and their mechanics and the resulting restrictions, *Sunset Overdrive* bellows 'Hey, isn't this idea stupid!?' while actively making you carry out said stupid idea. There's no quicker way to undermine your gameplay mechanics than to actively point out how flawed they are. Throwing a few cute references to *Mario*, *Portal*, and other Insomniac games doesn't remedy that.

Sunset Overdrive is a *Ratchet & Clank* game given a new skin that's as bulbous and infected as the OD it makes you fight. It's by no means a bad experience – the gameplay is functional and if you take a shine to it, likely to be playable for a good 40 hours or more. But it seems like it was made for an audience of gamers over a decade ago, brimming with try-hard references and cringe-worthy jokes. Penetrate the skin, and you've got a serviceable game at the core. But a ten-hour journey to the centre of what makes *Sunset Overdrive* good feels more like a voyage to the centre of the earth.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SECTS IN THE CITY: If you were able to grab a pal and jump into the main story with them, this game would have scored better – figuring out complementary techniques would give it so much more depth.

VERDICT 6/10
THE HUMOUR GRATES, BUT IT'S FUN TO PLAY… EVENTUALLY



Above: For all you pop-culture aficionados, the game is scattered with references to everything from games to film to TV. Our favourite spot? The Bluth banana stand from *Arrested Development*.

INSANITY IS DOING THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER AGAIN

Far Cry 4

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

When Ubisoft finds success, it sure knows how to capitalise on it, and *Far Cry 4* is a strong example of this. In fact, so closely it resembles the template set before it with *Far Cry 3* that there's only really one phrase to use to describe the latest open-world FPS: more of the same. That isn't inherently such a terrible thing, of course, and there are enough tweaks to the overall package – however subtle they be – that there's a valid reason for hopping in for another adventure. The difference here, of course, is Kyrat, the fictional Tibetan country that is currently embroiled in a civil war as its freedom fighters hope to overthrow surprisingly amicable dictator Pagan Min.

That, as you may have already gathered, is where you come in. The rather simple premise of the game is unceremoniously cast aside as Ajay Ghale – who only travels to Kyrat to scatter his mother's ashes – becomes the hero of the Golden Path, the 'terrorist' group seeking to dispose of Pagan. It's almost endearing how quickly this particular story element is cast aside, however, despite the protests of Ajay himself.

Before long and without any real convincing, Ajay is capturing towers, combatting outposts and skinning every animal that has the misfortune to cross his path. But in a fresh approach to iterative gameplay, Ubisoft has opted to ignore the build-up of abilities and opportunities and instead cast you into the fire if not immediately then much quicker than ever before. Tutorial missions are at a minimum and there are no convoluted and unnecessary cutscenes or objectives to explain away particular features – for example, Ajay can tag enemies with his camera immediately and there's no effort on Ubisoft's part to hand you that camera. It just *is*, and that's enough – not everything *needs* to be explained, after all.

The core of the gameplay remains the freedom to explore and tackle the game at your own pace. You may be driven to hunt fauna for their skins and the crafted upgrades they lead to, you may feel compelled to unlock every single bell tower the game has or you may simply wish to handle the missions as they come. There's a

Right: There's a decent range of characters to meet throughout the game, though only a handful have any real significance on the story of the game.

Below: *Far Cry* has fully embraced the sandbox and leans on random moments rather than scripted events to wow you.

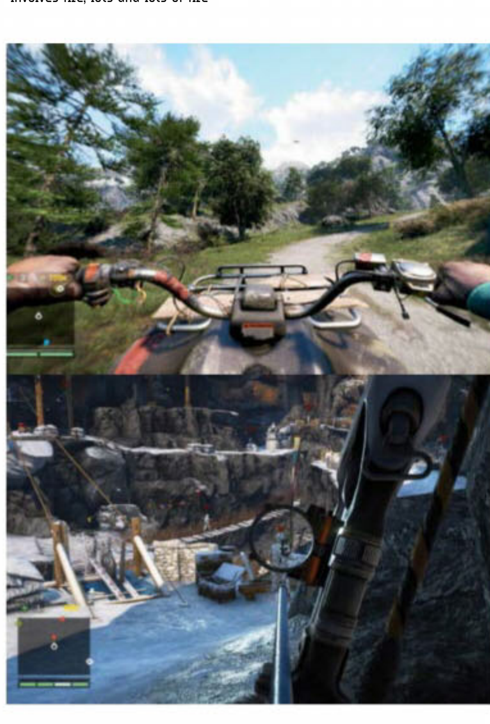


Above: There's a bizarre satisfaction to witnessing the aftermath of your destruction after a fight. Usually that involves fire, lots and lots of fire

Below: The vibrant streets of Kyrat bring to mind the Himalayan villages of *Uncharted 2*, and look just as beautiful and detailed as Naughty Dog's effort, if not more so.



FAR CRY 4 MAKES NO PRETENCE TO BE ANYTHING BUT A PLAYGROUND, ONE FULL OF OPPORTUNITY BOTH EMERGENT AND SCRIPTED



Above: Bows have been popular recently; the combination of skill – you need a far greater sense of timing and distance than a bullet – and its silent death makes for a coolly satisfying weapon.

ROOM FOR TWO

The addition of proper, open-world co-op is a beneficial one for the series, but very little has been done to enhance the game when another player is joining you in Kyrat. The main story missions aren't accessible and the difficulty isn't scaled to allow for the extra player. This does mean you're capable of working together towards goals in a more emergent fashion – one player acting as the spotter in a stealthy attack on an outpost or fortress, for example – but in most cases these can be completed far too easily with a second player. All the same it is a great addition, especially considering the ability to grapple onto gyrocopters to be airdropped – guns-a-blazing – into the heat of battle while your friend provides molotov air support..

decent variety to each of these missions, too, and though they rarely offer much in the way of imagination – they almost always involve killing *something* – the gameplay itself bolsters the otherwise lacklustre mission design. How you approach a problem is up to you and there are enough elements to combine together that *Far Cry 4* emboldens a great sense of creativity. You might wish to simply assault an outpost silently, for example, or lay waste to it by careening a buggy strapped with C4 into its centre before climbing aboard an elephant and crushing any who try to retaliate. It's a game that provides the tools to deliver chaos, but eliminates any pressure to play in any particular way.

Choice remains a core part of the story missions, too, whereby you'll have opportunities to pick a future for the Golden Path, and ultimately which of the two potential leaders will take charge. Your options are binary: the traditional, culture-driven side of Sabal, or the modern-thinking but potentially immoral and hot-headed equivalent in Amita. The two are polar opposites, and though these choices don't *really* have an effect on the way *Far Cry 4* plays out, it's enough that you care about the option you pick. More could've been done to properly realise your actions within

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
Depending on how slow you want to take it – and how much of the extras you'll do – you'll get a comfortable 20 hours out of *Far Cry 4*.

Q. IMPROVED ANIMAL HUNTING?
The addition of animals like elephants and rhinos changes the way you approach some of your hunts, yes, but otherwise this remains unchanged.

Q. SO MORE OF THE SAME?
Completely. New additions are minimal, but that core gameplay remains solid and if you were a big fan of *Far Cry 3* you'll appreciate what this sequel has to offer.

BETTER THAN

SUNSET OVERDRIVE



AS GOOD AS

FAR CRY 3

the world – as it is, *Far Cry 4* is lacklustre in presenting Kyrat with an atmospheric and tangible narrative – but it at least has you caring for the key characters.

Where it does suffer in this regard, however, is in Pagan Min. Despite his opening sequences, he doesn't offer the same appeal that his forebear in *Far Cry 3*, Vaas, managed to, and for the largest part takes a backseat to the brewing rivalry between Sabal and Amita. When this is the reason you're fighting in the first place it's disappointing that, regardless of how charming and likeable Pagan is, he isn't made to feel a little more like an antagonist. But then perhaps that's Pagan's mistake, he's just a little too *pleasant* to be the bad guy. Of course none of this really matters in the grand schemes of *Far Cry 4*. It makes no pretence to be anything but a playground, one full of opportunity both emergent and scripted.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

RISE AND FALL: With the main goal of the game being to destroy a dictatorship, *Far Cry 4* needed to do more to make Kyrat first feel like an oppressed country and, secondly, make your choices feel like they had an impact.

Much of this same scope carries over to multiplayer, too, which remains a strong outing for the franchise. Here you'll play as either the Golden Path or the mystical Rakshasa, the tribal warriors of Shangri-La. Where the former comes equipped with a range of weaponry, vehicles and radar functionality, the latter wields bows, invisibility, summonable beasts and the ability to craft empowering syringes from the plants in the area. The disparity between the two forces isn't hugely original, but it still means *Far Cry 4*'s multiplayer manages to offer just a little bit more chaos and variety – especially with the addition of wingsuits – than the tried-and-tested online modes we usually see forcibly included in FPS games these days. It's not particularly inventive, but there is enough that it will – if nothing else – hold your attention for a good amount of time.

Which is probably the best way of explaining *Far Cry 4* as a whole, truth be told. While more could be done to make the world feel believable – thereby making you feel more responsible for the choices you make – Ubisoft is just trying to play it safe with its latest in the series, and at this point more of the same is *just* enough to make Far Cry 4 a valid purchase.

VERDICT 8/10
JUST DON'T EXPECT ANY DIFFERENT RESULTS



Above: The addition of new characters OddSock, Toggle and Swoop aren't quite as fresh as they might've sounded. They do provide a bit of variety to the on-disc levels, but ultimately there's not much more to them than that. How the community responds will be their ultimate selling point.

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

LittleBigPlanet 3

By now you probably know what it is you want to get out of *LittleBigPlanet*, and whichever direction it goes in will dictate whether this latest is for you. If the original *LittleBigPlanet* was innovation, its sequel was an intricate honing of that core concept, then this latest – this time not from series creator Media Molecule – is very particular about what it is trying to provide. Where the franchise has been the spokesperson for Play, Create and Share with each an equal yet disparate part, the third entry is far more weighted towards its diehard creators, and this is clear with the set of tools that comes along with this iteration.

That's not to say there isn't a reason for anyone else to not get involved: *LittleBigPlanet 3* still pays lip service to those keen on the 'Play' avenue, but you might not get quite as much out of it as you would have hoped. As always, the campaign levels that come along with the game are more akin to elaborate tutorials, entire worlds devoted to some of the core new tools and mechanics implemented into the game. Whether that's the three new playable characters, the handful of equipment little Sackboy can equip or the various additions such as quests and 'world maps'. Hugh Laurie's voice work adds a huge amount, too, alongside the familiar tones of Stephen Fry. It's a much more condensed experience, however, and though it does offer a great sense of whimsy – a series' staple, after all – it doesn't feel quite as fresh as it once did. There's no overlooking quite how impressive each of these levels are, of course, their design having improved considerably – even over the Vita version – but it just needs something a little more, moreso even than the addition of OddSock, Toggle and Swoop, to make its Play aspect standout like it once did.

The biggest focus for the game, then, is on those that truly get the most from the series, the bevy of user creators each of varying skills. There's a much greater depth of control to the systems in Create mode, and a simplification of others that – even in *LittleBigPlanet 2* – required a great deal of faffing about. Customisable powerups and abilities, for example, override the need to create separate Sackbots with

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4/PS3
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Sumo Digital
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

IT'S ABOUT TIME MORE WAS DONE TO MAKE THIS SET OF TOOLS MORE UNDERSTANDABLE TO A WIDER GROUP OF PLAYERS

FAQs

Q. PLAY?

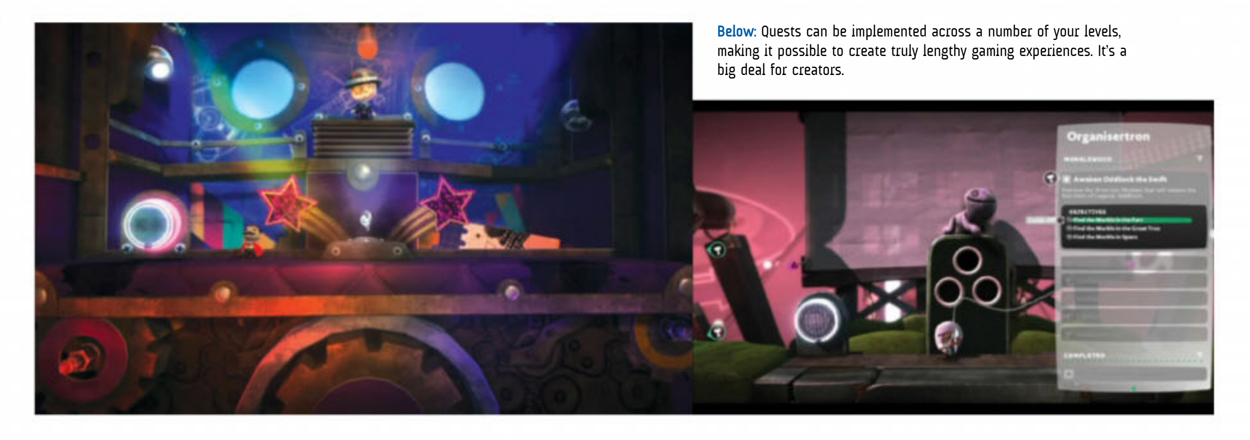
If you enjoyed the previous *LBP* games then you'll get as much out of the Play aspect as well here, it's just not nearly as delectable as it was in the last game.

Q. CREATE?

It'll still take some learning, but this set of tools is easier to customise and has all the right additions to make this side of the game better than ever.

Q. SHARE?

The same as it ever was, really. It'd be great if more was done to highlight tutorials from the best creators, or a 'store' of sorts where you can download and share created objects for your own use.



Below: Quests can be implemented across a number of your levels, making it possible to create truly lengthy gaming experiences. It's a big deal for creators.



Right: There are, of course, an incredible amount of ways to customise your characters.

Below: This is one example of a top-down level made for the game itself, and a prime example of how the toolset can be used to change the core gameplay.

altered movesets and instead gives creators immediate access to alterable statistics and actions. Or the addition of Adventures, individual maps that can be used to pin different levels into a single, core group of levels.

As proven with the Play portion of the game, in fact, these can allow for separate hubs where players can travel through different levels, complete quests, collect specific items and even purchase items from a store. Combine this with the customisable powerups and you can see the potential for expansive and impressive RPGs from *LBP* creators. The scope of these additions means the series is no longer about making your own levels but, instead, about making your own *games*. It's an idea that *Project Spark* has attempted to tackle very recently, but something that *LittleBigPlanet* – with its proven experience and learned creators – might just manage to pull off a little more amicably.

But much like *Project Spark, LittleBigPlanet 3* suffers under the weight of its own complexity. While many of the tools to creating and customising levels remain intact – so creators, that's XOR gates, Microchips and whatnot – the further range of tools and additions continues to keep newcomers from making the most of all these tools. A 'Popit Academy' section of levels – which combines elements of Play and Create to help build a safe learning environment – initially shows promise, but ultimately only offers insight into the more basic tools – bounce pads, connectors and the like – rather than any of the more complicated options that you'll need to learn to make anything other than a platforming stage. It's a wasted opportunity, ultimately, a kind of halfway house between making its Create mode accessible, but not providing quite enough detail and depth for those who have always had the imagination but never the drive to figure out the subtleties of creation. As ever, you're going to need to step outside of the game itself and into numerous communities and YouTube channels if you want to make your own game idea come to life. Sumo Digital might've smoothed the creation process out, but that's only useful to those who, frankly, will be buying the game anyway. At this point in the series it's about time more was done to make this set of deep, complex tools more understandable to a wider group of players.

MISSING LINK

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MASTER AND PUPIL: Not everyone wants to spend their gaming time studying, so as great as the improved Create suite is, it seems wasted without in-depth tutorials from Sumo Digital.

So it's not that *LittleBigPlanet 3* is a lesser version of the franchise – though consistent lag on opening the Popit menu and a handful of bugs do suggest this was a more rushed affair – just that there's not really enough to distinguish it from its previous entries. It's all great news for creators, of course, but as already mentioned these are a group of players already devoted to and already sold on the third game, perhaps even before it was announced.

The fact that you can still play all the games created on the original *LittleBigPlanet* and its sequel is enough alone to make the switch valuable – especially if you've cast aside the PS3 in favour of the PS4 – but sadly it doesn't have the same level of innovation that either of the previous two games offered. We've seen enough to know that *LBP3* will have tons of inventive experiences in the coming months – but as a core game outside of its 'Share' functionality, well that's just not different enough to make it truly stand out as did its brethren.



VERDICT 8/10

COULD ALIENATE THOSE WHO FAVOUR PLAY

SACKBOY PLAYS TWITCH

There's a PS4-exclusive feature for the threequel in the form of the Live Interaction tool and there's some hidden genius to this. Strap the item to an object in the game and you can have it search for words in Twitch chat while the level is being livestreamed. In a world where having interactive chat play games of *Pokémon* – or even a fish play *Street Fighter* – is entertainment, this could mean a whole new way of having Twitch viewers play games. It'll take some truly talented and devoted creators to make the most of the feature, but we hope someone does.





QUITE A LOT OF BANG FOR YOUR BUCK

Halo: The Master Chief Collection

Getting caught up in too much nostalgia is something to be avoided at the best of times, but in trying to assess 343 Industries' attempts to revamp and repackage the Master Chief saga to date, it's hard not to get swept up. The *Halo* series under Bungie's guardianship was often at the pinnacle of video game narrative design and more or less created the template for online multiplayer shooters for years to come. These games are historic and *The Master Chief Collection* carries that weight very well. In fact playing these classic missions and multiplayer maps again, it's odd that the older titles (*Halo 2* celebrating its tenth anniversary with a new HD lick of paint) feel as relevant as ever.

The *Halo* games have been reliably on the scale from good to excellent. Playing *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary* on Xbox 360 was proof enough that these titles can stand the test of time with a few small tweaks. So we could come into this collection with some degree of confidence that *Halo 2* wasn't going to look a mess. As it happens, it sometimes puts the other games on this disc to shame. We're not often wowed by the quality of cutscene CGI, but Blur – the production company behind *Halo 2*'s new cinematics – has done a spectacular job. It's not just a matter of seeing how much better they look compared to the originals, which you can do with a quick tap of the View button. These scenes are some of the best CGI you'll see anywhere. Period. They elevate the drama, sell the story and bring new life and intensity to the gameplay that follows every time.

The *Anniversary* treatment through the rest of *Halo 2* is just as impressive as it was with *Combat Evolved* and getting to switch between visuals is just as entertaining. What is perhaps not as pleasing at times are some of the audio 'enhancements' that have taken place. Some of the musical score has taken on a decidedly cheesy rock flavour that wasn't as noticeable before, particularly during some of the Arbiter's early missions. In places, the AI also took a bit of a nose dive, which is a shame because on the whole Bungie's original Grunt, Jackal, Elite structure works really well, as *Destiny* players have rediscovered. That said, virtually all other aspects of this chapter have

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Games Studios
DEVELOPER: 343 Industries
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: *Combat Evolved Anniversary* probably still offers a stronger single-player experience than *Halo 2*, thanks in part to some more varied level design. The visual upgrade to *Halo 2* though has given it a new lease of life and the multiplayer remains top notch.
Right: *Halo 3* may look like the poor relative compared to the other games now, but battles such as these mean it's still one of the most fun to play.



RATING A REMAKE

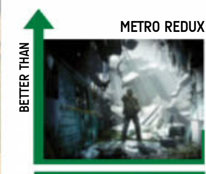
When we're looking at a remade, upgraded, upscaled title like *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*, we're considering a lot of things. Has the game dated badly? Is the upscaling effective? Does it take something away from the game? Is that something important or was it superfluous? 343 has clearly poured a lot of energy and passion into the *Halo 2 Anniversary* rebuild and has not skimped on embellishing the other titles in this package. Has *Halo* dated? In some small areas, but actually what will strike you is how well it holds up. Narratively, it has its weak points in single-player, but the run and gun gameplay holds firm. And online, it's a lot of fun so long as it's working, which unfortunately it wasn't for those who grabbed it at launch.





BETTER THAN

METRO REDUX





WORSE THAN

THE ORANGE BOX

been greatly improved with the crisp 60fps delivering a silky-smooth experience and the lighting in particular bringing atmosphere and texture to what was once a rather grey, flat, but still fun playground of destruction.

Sticking with the single-player just a short while longer, it was really *Halo 3* and *4* that we had the most concern about, receiving no headline enhancements and potentially looking a little dated next to their more recently revamped forebears. Thankfully, while *Halo 3* can look a little rough around the edges, the smooth frame-rate and resolution give it just a little extra and it's long been one of the stronger of the series for setpieces and level design. The Scarab battle and final escape have lost none of their luster with time. Likewise, *Halo 4* was a pretty great-looking game to begin with and, thanks to having been designed with amazing vistas in mind, it managed to deliver some of this collections most stunning landscapes.

And so as we attempted to wade back into the waters of *Halo* multiplayer, exploring its evolving ideas across these four main games, it was interesting to note how it felt both old-fashioned at times and on the cutting edge. Having spent most of the year playing the fast-paced *Titanfall* and then transferring to the bouncy, light gameplay of *Destiny* and *Call Of Duty*, the core feel of *Halo* online is incredibly familiar. The rest of the FPS world has apparently remembered that these games were supposed to be about having fun and working as a team, but *Halo* never really forgot that and *The Master Chief Collection* benefits from that steadfast vision.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CINEMATICS: Seriously, these new scenes from Blur are amazing to watch and bring new life to the story.
FORGE: Getting to play with the *Halo 2* maps is every fan's dream and secretly ours too.

With 100 maps to try and pick your way through, getting exactly the game you want may take a little time, but there's no shortage of options. It does make getting the same map over and over especially infuriating though when it's not one of your favourites. The trouble as you will no doubt know by now is that at launch *The Master Chief Collection* was dogged by online connection issues and poor matchmaking. When we could get a game going it was as glorious as ever, but it was sullied by the knowledge that the next game may prove a challenge to start. Fans have been rightly upset by this glaring issue, but at the time of going to press we remain confident this will be a short-term issue.

Most of our attention was placed on the new maps, redesigned from *Halo 2* and perhaps holding some clues as to the direction 343 will be looking to take *Halo 5: Guardians* next year. Being able to compare and contrast with the originals makes this task much easier, but its clear to see that between 343 and Certain Affinity, there's a comfortable balance to be found. The maps are not only kinetic and tightly bound, but porous enough to allow for fluidity of players, random occurrences and new ways of navigating. These were already among some of the best multiplayer maps ever made and these tweaked, rebalanced and remade versions have maintained their verve. The same can be said for the collection as a whole, if not the online connectivity.

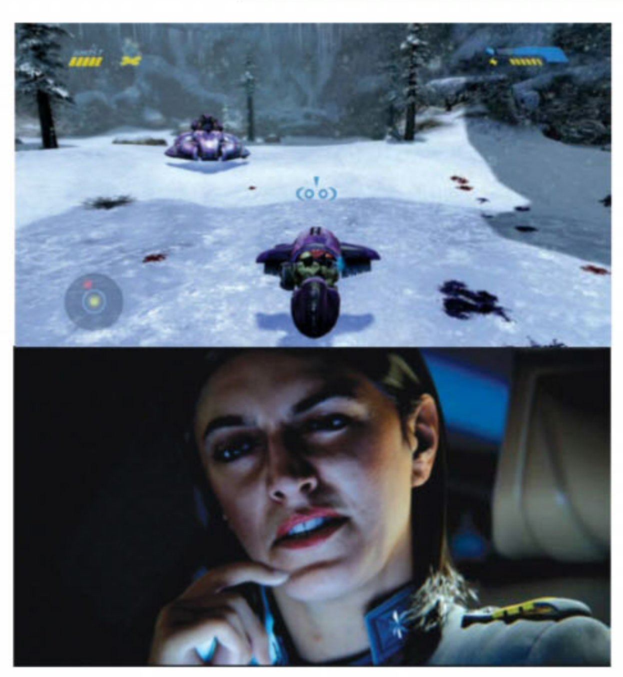
THE NEW CUTSCENES ELEVATE THE DRAMA, SELL THE STORY AND BRING NEW LIFE AND INTENSITY TO THE GAMEPLAY THAT FOLLOWS EVERY TIME

FAQs

Q. DOES HALO 2 HOLD UP?
It really does, at least online where it excelled anyway. The single-player campaign has its ups and downs.

Q. WHY NO REACH OR ODST?
Because Master Chief wasn't the star of those games, but 343 has hinted they may get a look later.

Q. ARE THEY REALLY WORTH PLAYING AGAIN?
If you're a fan, absolutely, but really this is a great way for a new generation of players to rediscover some classic FPS gaming.



Above: Each of the different *Halo* games had its own approach to Master Chief's design beyond just how his armour looked, and it's nice to see that honoured rather than creating a homogenous Chief through the series. 343 hasn't overcomplicated things. Left: The immediacy of the run and gun gameplay of Halo remains as potent as ever. It has aged very well indeed.

VERDICT 8/10
YOUR ROSE-TINTED GLASSES WON'T SLIP MUCH

THE RETURN OF THE MOST PRECIOUS GEMS

Pokémon Omega Ruby/ Alpha Sapphire

After *Pokémon X* and *Y*, we were unsure about where the series could go: the formula that *Pokémon* had been riding for the better part of a decade had been broken, and the extra dimension added to the graphical pane had inspired an extra layer of depth in the story, the mechanics and the all-important metagame.

With that in mind, we're going to review *Omega Ruby/Alpha Sapphire* as the true RPGs that they are – we'll take this space to note that the main game and storyline are as 'typically' *Pokémon* as you'd expect, riffing off the original *Ruby/Sapphire* for narrative beats whilst throwing in new characters (specifically: a mysterious antagonist called Zinnia), new Pokémon (well, Mega versions of old ones) and a darker, Godzilla-inspired story relating to version mascots Groudon and Kyogre.

Beyond that, *Omega/Alpha* completely shake up the Pokémon core game and incorporate some fundamentally different mechanics into the overworld, making the metagame more accessible and relevant to the average player. The PokéGear makes a return from the original GameBoy Advance games, but utilises the bottom DS screen better than any *Pokémon* game to date. You can instantly flit between the online element, Pokémon Amie and the hidden stat training features introduced in X/Y, as well as a dynamic map – which brings back the ability to re-match defeated trainers – and, most importantly, the new 'Detective Mode' scanner.

In a nutshell, this scanner adds another level to the already multi-faceted *Pokémon* experience: every Pokémon that lives in a route, a cave, or the sea can be seen in the overhead map, denoted by either a tail, its ears or some other signifying feature sticking out above the grass. These Pokémon are different, and if you dedicate yourself to finding the same one, over and over, you'll be able to 'unlock' monsters that have the enviable Hidden abilities, special Egg moves you'd usually only be able to get through breeding, or even creatures with stupendously high IV ratings (the invisible stats used in the meta that can give you that slight but oh-so-important upper hand in competitive games).

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Game Freak
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



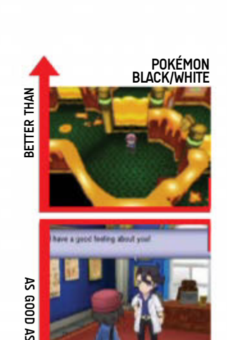
Right: Rather than visit TVs in strangers' houses, like you used to have to do, scrolling news can be attached to the bottom screen, where you can get updates on all your friends' activities in game.

OMEGA/ALPHA MAKES THE METAGAME MORE ACCESSIBLE AND RELEVANT TO THE AVERAGE PLAYER

The fact that these Pokémon are made available to you practically straight away is amazing: where before you'd have to spend hours hatching eggs or playing with the odds to try and get your perfect Skarmory, now you can just hunt chains of them through the scanner – searching for that Impish Skarmory is now as simple as looking at a screen and deciding whether or not you want to commit to that specific monster (aided even more by a handy 'Potential' gauge, rating Pokémon one to three stars).

Whilst we do have a huge amount of enthusiasm for these new updates, the remakes have done little to address the complaints of fans of the originals – namely; the breadth of Pokémon in the main game is scant. After how spoilt we've been with *Pokémon Black 2/White 2* and *X/Y*, it's quite jarring to go back to Hoenn and *not* be able to recruit any decent Fire types outside of the starter. We feel it is worth mentioning that the full National Pokédex is available from the 2nd gym onwards, though – just because you can't catch it in *Alpha/Omega* doesn't mean your friend in *X/Y* can't swap one over to you. The whole online functionality has been practically copied and pasted from *X/Y*, too; the O-Powers, Wonder Trades, Shout-Outs and everything else included).

Further to that multiplayer element, the best thing about the original *Ruby/Sapphire* games makes a return, too: the Secret Bases. These customisable hideouts are where the longevity of the game will come into play – you can recruit up to five other players into your Base at any one time, and lay traps or decorations down at will. Game Freak's intention here is clearly for you to make your own gym – something the standard *Pokémon* player has *always* wanted to do, don't pretend like you haven't – and populate it with your



EPISODIC CONTENTMENT

Typically, the post-game is where *Pokémon* games *really* start; the Elite Four are just the beginning. *Alpha/Omega* is no exception, with the mysteriously titled 'Delta Episode' opening up after you've completed the main game. Without going into too much detail (spoilers!), 'Delta' basically opens up the skies above Hoenn for you to explore, which are populated with version-exclusive Legendary Pokémon and patches of grass containing non-native monsters, similar to the Friend Gardens from *X/Y*. With a whole new chapter of story, some really dark story notes (especially for a *Pokémon* game) and even a trip into the philosophical concept of cosmism (yes, really) you can tell this is a game aimed at *Pokémon* fans that were playing the series over 10 years ago – this isn't kid-only stuff, for sure.

FAQs

Q. CAN I COMPLETE THE POKÉDEX?
Yes – between these games and X/Y, you can catch 'em all.

Q. IS PIKACHU IN IT?
Yes, and you can dress him up as a wrestler or a doctor in contests, too!

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
You can rush the main game in about 20 hours, but if you want to experience everything, you'll be playing for 100+ hours.



Left: Post-game, you can travel to the skies with a Latios/Latias – dependent on version – where you can hunt down legendary Pokémon (up to three a day) or visit special patches of grass

Above: Pikachu's voice has been swapped to the anime version, but that's fine – it sounds better than his messy MIDI cry anyway.

hardest, baddest Pokémon – something we're really looking forward to trying out in the wild once the game launches (if the crazy population of *X/Y*'s StreetPass was anything to go by, at least).

A couple of new moves have been thrown in to spice things up since the last games – but nothing that will fundamentally alter the core competitive team you may have run for *X/Y* – and the new Mega Pokémon (including Lopunny, Metagross, Steelix, Glalie, Swampert, Sceptile and more) aren't wildly different from their original forms. *Alpha/Omega*'s innovation really does lie in the bottom-screen scanner: we're amazed by how much we found ourselves stalking around in the same route, looking for the most well-composed Pokémon of each species – even though we knew we wouldn't use them in battle.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

NATURAL SELECTION: Game Freak always wanted to make Hoenn feel very natural, in touch with reality(ish) – *Alpha/Omega*'s in-world Pokémon realises that dream.

Pokémon remains the most in-depth and satisfying RPG you could hope to play on a handheld device, and the continued visibility of the metagame in the core experience is doing wonders for players that perhaps didn't want to embark on the ostensibly epic journey it takes to achieve a team of six competition-ready Pokémon. *Pokémon Omega Ruby/Alpha Sapphire* is an almost perfect game, held back only by the selection of creatures available during the 20-hour long main quest and some post-game elements that didn't make it through from *X/Y*.

Pokémon Ruby/Sapphire were the highest selling games on Game Boy Advance, and we totally expect that to be replicated by *Alpha/Omega* on the 3DS. As a *Pokémon* experience, it's *that* good.

VERDICT 9/10
THE MOST COMPLETE POKÉMON EXPERIENCE YET



Above: See that – a Skitty with a first move of Fake Out, whose ability is Normalize? That's why we love *Alpha/Omega* – it's only level eight, too!

“IN SHORT, BE WARY OF LIAR”

Lords Of The Fallen

Above: Well, that's *Lords Of The Fallen* summed up in a single screenshot. If you disliked circle-strafing in *Dark Souls II*, you'll absolutely hate this game.

“It looks familiar but… like a child's memory. It's twisted, broken.” This is one of the few lines of dialogue in *Lords Of The Fallen* that didn't make us sigh, retch or laugh. We merely nodded in agreement, simply due to how well it applies to the game itself. Any attempt to distance this from the *Souls* games is pure folly – *Lords Of The Fallen* is the kid at the back of the class that copies From Software's homework every week, so it seems like it knows what it's doing. But when that lifeline is removed and you start asking the difficult questions again, all of a sudden, that smart kid isn't so smart.

With *The Witcher 2*, Tomasz Gop and his team made it clear that they knew the action-RPG genre and could easily make their mark on it. With *Lords Of The Fallen*, Gop's new crew seems reduced to lifting structure, mechanics and even trophies from the most highly regarded action-RPG series of the last generation in search of an audience. With Sony securing *Bloodborne* exclusively for PS4, that audience may well exist. But that fact does nothing to change the truth that however you look at it, *Lords Of The Fallen* is just that not-as-good-as-they-think-it-is *Dark Souls* cosplay outfit that you pretended to take a picture of out of courtesy at an expo that one time.

This is perhaps an overly damning introduction to the game, especially considering that a couple of aspects of the facsimile hold up better than the original print. Well, at least they do at first glance. R1 spam is common practice in the *Souls* games, players mashing the basic attack button to string together long combos and, especially in *Dark Souls II*, even being rewarded for it. Here, though, a clever timing system allows longer strings by reducing stamina costs based on accuracy.

As with many of the other subtle differences, it's neat in theory but near pointless in practice – even with perfect timing, attacks can and will still bounce off raised shields that are nowhere near the targeted area or just fly through enemies without registering, making cheaper tactics than those this introduction should eliminate the most effective. Stick a poison Rune on your preferred weapon and you're laughing, one cheap shot and a little patience basically counting for three or four honest blows on most enemies. They'll do it to you too (fire arrows can set you ablaze even while

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: CI Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

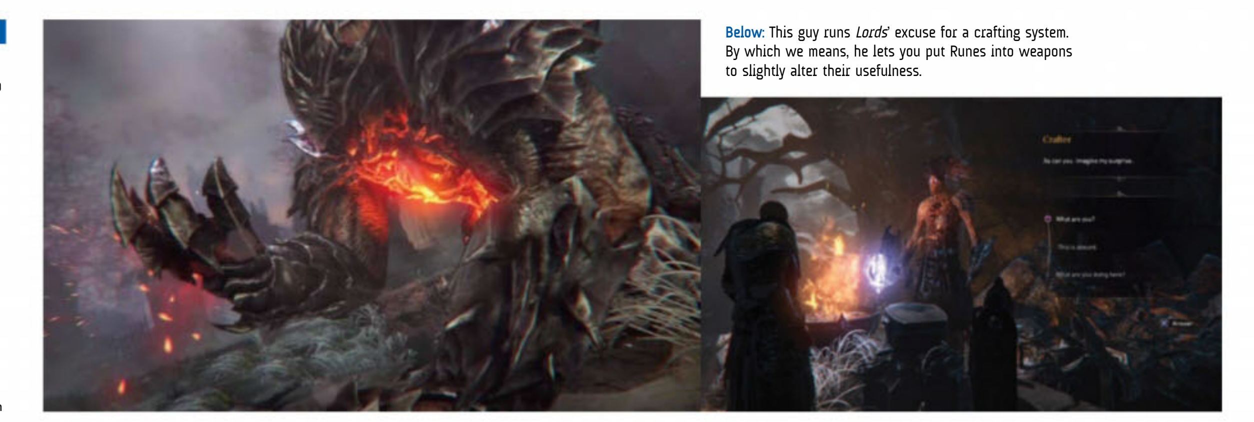
EASTENDERS-QUALITY VOICE ACTING AND LIP SYNC THAT WOULD MAKE A SOCK PUPPET BLUSH

FAQs

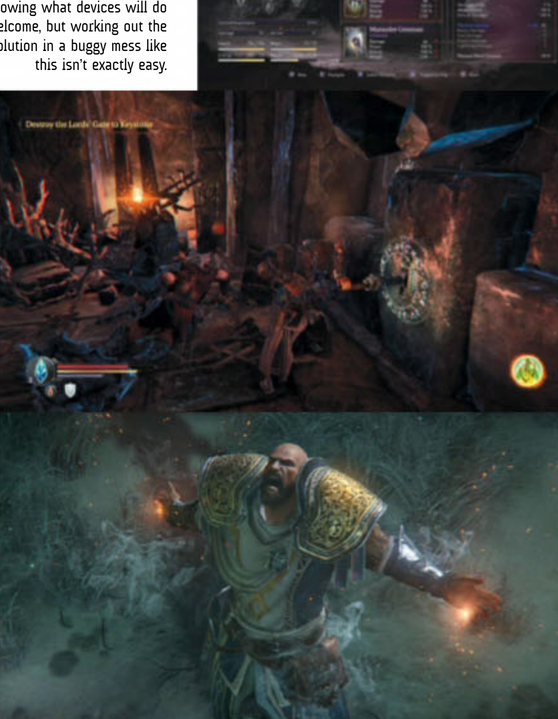
Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
You're probably looking at 15-20 hours on your first run, if you know which way up to hold a controller. More if you get lost. Which you probably will.

Q. ANY MULTIPLAYER?
Nothing of the sort. If you're going to copy another game, you'd think that you'd replicate the best element of said game, but no.

Q. IS IT JUST A SOULS RIP-OFF, THEN?
Not entirely, in all fairness. But with mechanics like recovering lost experience and checkpoint-based potions, it's hard to see the game as anything more than a poor lookalike.



Below: This guy runs *Lords*' excuse for a crafting system. By which we means, he lets you put Runes into weapons to slightly alter their usefulness.



Right: Weapon stats change based on your own, with some locked out until you hit the required stats and others not working even when you do.

Below: The mystery of not knowing what devices will do is welcome, but working out the solution in a buggy mess like this isn't exactly easy.

guarding, for some reason) so apparently it's fine.

Mimicking *Dark Souls II* so closely might not have been the best play here, since many of the key issues with *Lords* are things players also complained about in From's game. Loading screens and tool tips suggest that enemies work off the same Stamina-based mechanics as you, but that clearly isn't the case – shielded foes neither need to lower their guard to recover Stamina nor lose it when their barrier is challenged, meaning the only way to make a dent is to wait for them to make the first move. As such, it becomes the same circle-strafe barn dance that many disliked in *DSII*, with most humanoid bosses offering nothing more than a slightly more punishing version of the same dull routine. There are attempts to mix things up in this regard, sure, but unpredictable projectiles and raid-style instant kill moves really don't sit well among a collection of elements and mechanics borrowed so clearly from one of the most skill-based games in its field.

Technical issues don't exactly help *Lords Of The Fallen's* cause but considering the frame-rate flatline that was Blighttown, we can only assume that the bugs, glitches and constant frame rate drops are just another deliberate nod in From Software's direction. *Lords* looks pretty damn good at times, to give it its due. But when this takes so much of a toll on the fluidity of what should be a precision-heavy game, you do have to wonder whether the trade-off is actually worth it. As far removed as you may like to think you are from the 60fps snobbery that has come to the fore this generation, zoetrope-esque frame-rate lows – coupled with myriad other glitches and bugs – are enough to really hurt the experience, although no more than the *EastEnders*-quality voice acting and lip sync that would make a sock puppet blush. Somehow.

Confusing as *Souls* maps may be, environment styles and actual landmarks do a great job of allowing players to place themselves in the world and work out – if only vaguely – where to go next. *Lords* offers nothing of the sort, so despite actually defiling the screen with text objectives and offering the antithesis of the *Souls* narrative approach with collectible audio diaries, finding your way through a sea of near-identical hallways and arbitrarily locked doors à la PS2-era *Silent Hill* can be a slog. Loading times between areas don't help, and nothing takes you out of an experience like this quite like having to stare at two splash screens painted with obvious advice for an entire minute just because you made a wrong turn. It's one thing to put out a punishing game, but quite another to punish players for no good reason. That's a fine line, to be fair but even so, it's one that *Lords Of The Fallen* makes it clear in countless ways it is too intoxicated to walk – for *Souls* fans, playing *Lords* is like walking into a bar and hearing a cash-in-hand covers band roll out one of your favourite songs without even knowing what it's about. A bit like when All Saints covered *Under The Bridge*, if you'll excuse such a disgusting digression. Those not planning on having a PS4 in time for *Bloodborne*'s release might get something out of this tribute act, then. But for everyone else, Lords is undoubtedly more 'You Died' than 'You Defeated'.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TIMING IS EVERYTHING: Learn when to strike and strings will cost less Stamina, allowing for more hits.
CASTERS EVERYWHERE: There's no avoiding it here – you *have* to use one of the schools of magic.

NEXT-GEN CAN WAIT

The more visuals improve, the more jarring it is to see problems that have been around since the dawn of the 32-bit era. As nice as it may look, having a strike bounce of a shield raised nowhere near the target area or having exploration cut short by a troublesome shrub will remind you that you're not the master of your own fate in this world. Locked doors that sing from old PS2 hymn sheets don't help matters either, unless the goal is to stop playing, enjoy a selection of other great games and wait for *Bloodborne*. In that instance, they couldn't help more.



VERDICT 5/10
IF ONLY IT COULD BE SO GROSSLY INCANDESCENT

THE DANGEROUS GAME

Football Manager 2015

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: Sports Interactive
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.4Ghz, 1Gb RAM, DX9
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

FOOTBALL MANAGER 2014





JOSE MOURINHO

WORSE THAN

The tales of *Football Manager* extremism have become part of gaming's own urban legend. Everyone's probably heard a friend tell the story about how 'they' don a suit for their team's appearance in the FA Cup Final. Countless tales of divorce and familial breakdowns have circulated for years, the '*Football Manager* Widow' being shorthand for any long-suffering spouse lumbered with a partner who'd rather spend time glaring at their laptop screen than the real world in front of them.

Of course, such tales are often exaggerated, but why is it that *Football Manager* manages to get under the skin like so few other games can? It's surely something to do with the heady cocktail of escapism and reality it blends together like a master mixologist. The impossible-to-reach world of high-level football management and the power that brings combined with a stats-based engine that cleverly nudges you in the direction of success but throws countless pitfalls in your way; it's one of the most intoxicating combinations around.

This has been the case since the *Championship Manager* days many years ago, games that belied their simplistic presentation with their immeasurable depth. In the past few years, though, *Football Manager* can make a legitimate claim to technical impressiveness as well as nerdy booksmarts. The match engine has evolved from text, to little dots moving around a pitch, to its current form, a fully modelled 3D affair, featuring different stadiums, pitches and countless animations. It's hardly *FIFA 15*, but it is a thoroughly decent approximation of a football match, especially when you consider how many calculations are going on behind the scenes.

The match engine is probably the most improved area of the game over its predecessor too, and the most obvious reason to upgrade outside of the typical roster and league updates. It's still a little wooden and



Above: The match engine doesn't require much grunt from your PC, and can be scaled down to work with a modest GPU set-up without sacrificing the on-pitch complexity and tactical input you can have from the sidelines.

Below: It can be a dry experience, and obviously not one for those not interested in the tribulations of modern-day football, but you'd be hard pressed to find a game that gets more out of plain words and numbers than *Football Manager*.

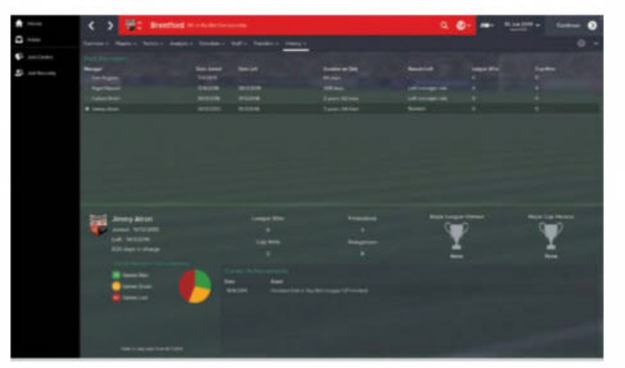
FAQs

Q. DO I NEED TO WATCH THE MATCHES?
No, a streamlined mode will allow you to just watch the text commentary.

Q. WHY ARE THERE NO TEAM BADGES?
Weird licensing issues. A fan mod is already out there to rectify the situation.

Q. WILL IT RUIN MY LIFE?
There's a good chance it might, yes.

Below: The series is now so far ahead of the competition it has effectively killed it all off. Only free mobile games have any sort of audience in this market now. An impressive feat for another British powerhouse studio.



All About That Database

It's been a long-standing football in-joke that real-world football managers use *FM*'s database as a scouting tool, and it's easy to see why. The likes of Arsene Wenger and (erk) David Moyes have mentioned the game in the past, and it has a killer reputation for spotting promising young talent from across the globe. Of course, it's not always right. Howard Kendall signing Ibrahima Bakayoko in the Nineties had to surely have something to do with his absurd rating in *Championship Manager 97*. So be wary of those players who just sound a little bit too good to be true. If you happen to be a Premier League manager, anyway.

WIN A GAME, AND YOU WANT TO KEEP THE STREAK GOING, LOSE AND YOU NEED TO RECTIFY THAT IMMEDIATELY

players tend to ice skate across the turf, but the footballing scenarios it paints are unusually realistic – more so than running a traditional football game on CPU-vs-CPU mode even. You'll see free kicks played into the box from appropriate angles, strikers making intelligent runs, proper counter attacks, and teams using the width of the pitch to draw out defenders and create space. The goals feel believable, and in the case of one absurd di Maria volley, occasionally glorious.

Players can now use different parts of their feet to strike the ball, making for much more variety in passing, which leads to a noticeably more fluid game on the park. More importantly, though, you can really feel the difference when you – as manager – start making those important decisions. It's not particularly hard for a football game of any kind to feel different if you change formation from 4-4-2 to 3-5-1, but the simple act of shifting a key player further wide, or even delivering a powerful individual talk to a youngster at half time, can have quantifiable impact. This elevates *Football Manager 2015* over its much older predecessors, because you feel like you can influence a match from the touchline as well as in the days and months preceding. You've always been able to tweak tactics during a match, but any long-term manager would tell you that the actual games were often set to the fastest speed rating, and beyond some half-time subs, not a lot of actual managing was going on from the sidelines.

Of course, you'll still be spending hours fiddling in menus and staring at spreadsheets. Those who have developed the *Football Manager* 'eye' over the years will still be able to scout a player in seconds just by glancing at their stat sheet – it's an amazing ability the brain has to marry numbers to identities – and hunting for transfers remains as compulsive as ever. Depth has been added to the more mundane elements of day-to-day managerial work, too. You'll be pestered for one-on-one conversations with players, whose demands often reflect their real-life counterparts, and there is a seemingly endless list of journalists who want to interview you. Interestingly, it's always tempting to choose the most PR-friendly answers, as they'll place less pressure on your staff and yourself, but choose to speak with outlandish confidence and then back it up and you'll be a hero to your players and fans.

ENHANCED

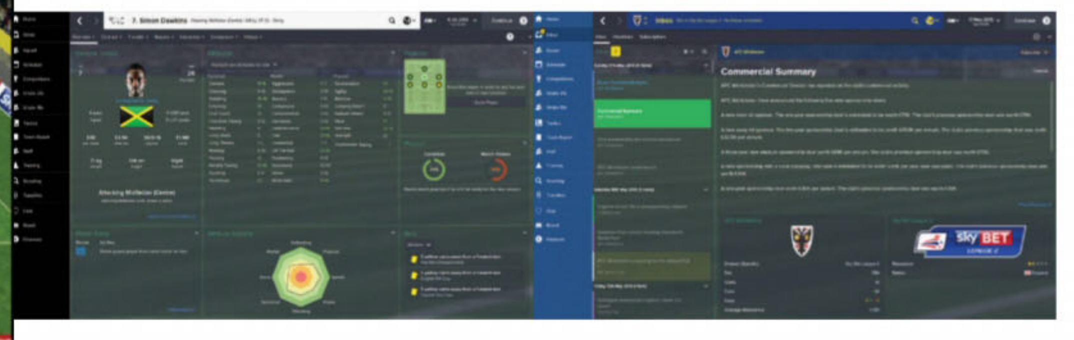
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TRICK STICK: Players will now use tricks, flicks and first-time passes to build a more exciting and flair-filled game of football, which will spice up the on-pitch experience.

As always, inconsistencies do pop up like Cantona's collar. As solid as the match engine is, it does feel like defending is a rarer art than it should be, perhaps in an attempt to show more impressive attacking highlights, but it can be hard to organise even a statistically excellent back line. And, of course, it wouldn't be *Football Manager* without the times where you feel like the game is scripted to destroy you, where nothing you do seems to help. Quite how the little numbers exactly work is locked in the vault at Sports Interactive, never to be revealed, but it's hardly unrealistic. Maybe that's why David Moyes rates it so highly.

Yet, we still persist. The flow of the action isn't quite as relentless as it was in the Nineties – the match engine and increased back-room obligations means that seasons flow slower and require more thought – but it's still almost impossible to turn off once you're on a roll. Win a game, and you want to keep the streak going, lose and you need to rectify that immediately.

Football Manager 2015 is the best version in a series that has been peerless for many years. It's not the kind of overhaul that suggests players of last year's game desperately need to upgrade, but the hardcore will not be dissatisfied. And if you're a lapsed fan, then we'll see you in your suit come cup final day.





VERDICT 8/10
BETTER THAN EVER, BUT KNOW THE RISKS GOING IN





Left: While the narrative backdrop of *Samurai Warriors 4* is based on the Sengoku era in Japan's real-world history, its camp characters with their outrageous attire and colloquial language are quite obviously heavily embellished.

DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS

Samurai Warriors 4

Set against the highly romanticised backdrop of Japan's 16th-century Warring States era, *Samurai Warriors 4* is a wild and frenetic mix of skilful mass brawling and goofy fun.

An impressive roster of 55 playable characters includes fan favourites and new additions that range from honour-bound, po-faced heroes to camp and perverse pantomime villains. Building on its predecessors' groundwork, series veterans will welcome the news that all of the dials have been cranked to 11 with only the occasional pause to catch a breath.

To wit, within 15 minutes of starting one of its 12 multi-mission story scenarios even newcomers will have racked up a few hundred KOs and achieved a combo chain of over 1,000. Taking apart the identikit minions of a rival army is a riotous clash of action and strategy that, happily, requires no former knowledge of the series' quirks.

However, the amount of on-screen information at any one time initially feels cluttered, bordering on overwhelming. Mission goals are often in a state of flux and frequently updated with bonus objectives, while the Japanese-only voice work requires you to parse subtitles alongside half a dozen other bits of screen furniture. That said, you quickly learn to switch between the two playable characters to respond to objectives that appear around the reasonably sized but largely featureless levels. *Samurai Warriors 4* obliges button-mashing on its easiest difficulty setting, but higher difficulty requires a more considered approach. The familiar mix of normal and heavy attacks is complemented by character-specific special skills, dashing hyper-attacks, mounted-combat and visually impressive Musou attacks, while higher-level enemies require use of guard-breaking techniques to force an in.

In all, combat rarely fails to be entertaining and as you grow in skill it only becomes more rewarding.

Away from the story, Chronicle Mode lets you create your own customised character and wander the world map, establishing relationships, hiring officers and pursuing life goals. Meanwhile, Free Mode lets you tackle the story missions with any previously unlocked character.

In all cases, *Samurai Warriors 4* provides a dose of camp high-drama and a dizzying set of interconnected characters. Its repetitive mission objectives occasionally threaten to it drag down, but its colourful cast and hack 'n' slash approach to mass brawling ensure it never falls too far from chaotic fun.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

KITCHEN-SINK: Drawing on the influence of its predecessors and multiple spin-offs, *Samurai Warriors 4* throws in more or less every character, feature and move-set from its burgeoning back catalogue.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo Koei
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 local and online
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

AS GOOD AS

DYNASTY WARRIORS 8: XTREME LEGENDS COMPLETE EDITION





WORSE THAN

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR

VERDICT 7/10
BLOOD, NONSENSE AND A LOT OF FUN



Above: The ability to remove elements of the HUD and on-screen info would have been welcome; even with all available options switched off, screen space is still at a premium.



Inset: Aside from the standard ramps made of cake and bridges made of rulers, some tracks have more interesting features. In one, a xylophone tinkles as you speed across it. In another, a toaster expels you to the next section.

MINIATURE MOTORING

Toybox Turbos

***Toybox Turbos* is even more deliberately nostalgic than the rest of the retro-inspired games coming out at the moment.** After all, developer Codemasters was responsible for the series on which *TT* is so clearly based, so despite its reluctance to use the name – presumably because it doesn't have the rights – it very much wants you to be reminded of *Micro Machines*.

And you will be, if not by the similarity of the logo, then as soon as you get behind the wheel. Aside from the lack of miniature drivers in the cars and giant people in the background, this follows the same formula: toy vehicles slip around short tracks in familiar environments. You can even play with a "retro top down" camera view, though that familiar problem of not being able to see the next corner can be mitigated through a lower, more modern angle.

More nostalgia comes from the tracks. Though the cartoony aesthetic is hardly going to set the game apart, the environments are filled with thoughtful details from erasers and colourful drink flasks in the schoolroom to wooden train tracks and Mousetrap-style marble runs in the playroom. Ordinary objects become part of the race, with ramps made out of wedges of cake and jam spills that slow you down.

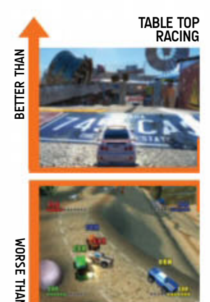
It may not dazzle graphically, but *Toybox Turbos* shows its modernity elsewhere. Each race has three stars, with different requirements for different modes: finish in a particular position in Classic, beat a particular time in Time Trial, overtake a particular number of vehicles in Overtake. It feels like a mobile game but does give the campaign a sense of progress as you work your way through seven cups.

One thing that hasn't changed is that this kind of game is far more fun with friends, and while online multiplayer is another modern inclusion it's worth getting people together to play on the same screen. Because the camera needs to track all four players only the Elimination mode is available, but it encompasses all the mechanics. The point is to outlast your competitors, i.e. avoid falling behind, falling off the edge of the track, or falling prey to the weaponised power-ups like mines and vehicle-mounted hammers.

It's so easy to slip off the edge or get stuck when trying to take a shortcut that the rounds are always short, which keeps tensions high but also limits the time for which people will be willing to play. Once you've unlocked everything in single-player, this will end up the kind of game you switch on every now and then when you've got people over and you remember you have it, a relatively cheap distraction that's old-fashioned fun but ultimately fails to stand out.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Core 2 Duo @ 2.4Ghz or AMD Athlon X2 5400+, 2 GB RAM, AMD HD2600 or NVIDIA Geforce 8600
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



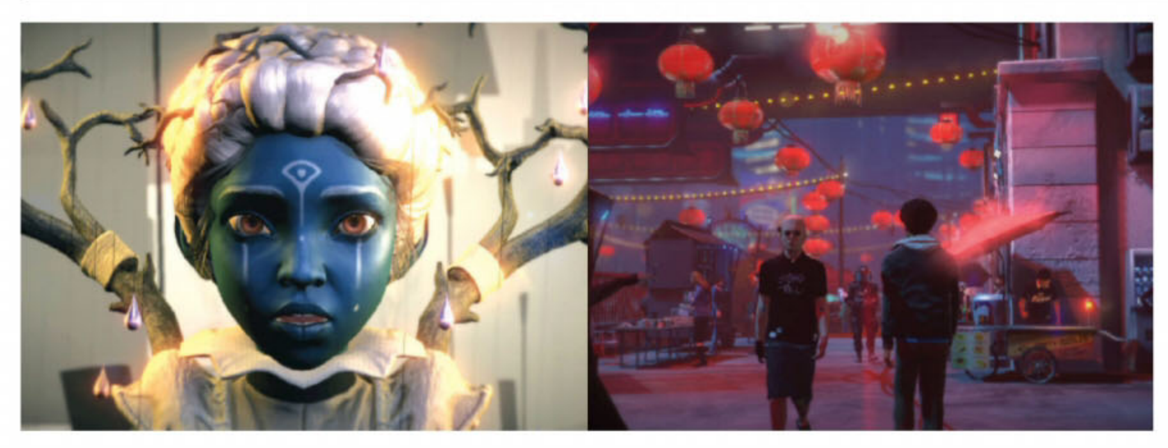


WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

PLAY DATE: Race with up to three others online: choose a track, vehicle type, camera angle, and even whether to let players who've failed a round perform an airstrike on those still racing.



VERDICT 6/10
FUN BUT FORGETTABLE



Left: Given that this is a game that was funded through Kickstarter and made by a relatively small team, the city of Europolis is impressively rendered. We look forward to seeing more as *Dreamfall* opens up to let us explore its other realms.

A JOURNEY WE'RE PLEASED TO HAVE STARTED

Dreamfall Chapters

The post-Telltale episodic game that drives the player's experience by presenting them with choices that affect how the story plays out finds itself in vogue at the moment. *Dreamfall Chapters* clearly takes influence from the Telltale stable in that regard, though it's worth mentioning that *The Longest Journey*, the series in which *Chapters* is an entry, started long before Telltale came into being. We say that because, early on, the game struggles somewhat with that history; faced with the difficult choice of overloading the player with exposition, or leaving newcomers a bit bemused when it comes to the world's lore and the characters' histories. *Dreamfall* tends towards the latter, leaving those unfamiliar with the series feeling as if they're lacking context for some of the choices they make in the opening stages.

Once it gets that baggage off its shoulders and opens itself up for exploration, however, concerns about not being in the loop when it comes to the series' narrative fade into the periphery. There's something compelling about the cyberpunk city of Europolis in which the majority of the game is set and, though the citizens roaming its streets seem a bit aimless, it has a real sense of place.

There's a distinct European flavour to the city, reflected in the political context forming the backdrop to *Dreamfall*'s story. Its subject matter is the troubling rise of the anti-immigrant right, lending it a prescience that's rare in the medium and catching your attention for that reason. However, its framing of the issues at hand is far too predictable and tepid, with the game showing a boring disdain for radical politics that means it doesn't deal with its subject matter in quite as sophisticated a way as it could, placing itself firmly in the middle of the political culture with which it takes issue. This is the first episode, of course, so we see plenty of room for more nuance as the game progresses.

There are some good ideas in *Dreamfall*. We particularly like the fact that characters' thoughts are vocalised when you hover over a dialogue option. Not only does this give you insight into the game's protagonists, it helps swerve a common problem with dialogue trees, whereby your character spouts something entirely at odds with what you intended. As to what we're thinking, it's impossible to definitively evaluate the merit of *Chapters* as a series after one episode, as we've yet to see the impact of choices we've made so far. Nevertheless, we're left finding ourselves wanting to play more and that can only be a good sign.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: Norway
PUBLISHER: Red Thread Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £23.99
RELEASE: 21/10/14
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPECS: Windows 7, 2GHz Core 2 Duo CPU, Intel HD Graphics 4000 GPU, 3GB RAM, 5GB HDD space

BETTER THAN

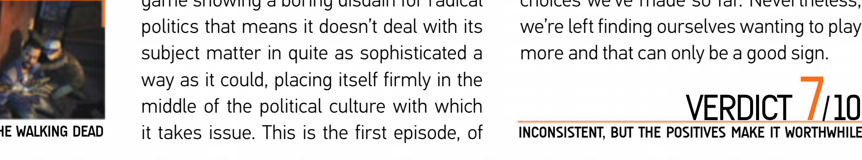


BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE GAME

WORSE THAN



THE WALKING DEAD



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

UP TO SPEED: Since *Dreamfall Chapters* struggles with how to deal with players new to the series, we wonder if some kind of optional catch-up feature, extrinsic to the main game, could ease newcomers in.

VERDICT 7/10

INCONSISTENT, BUT THE POSITIVES MAKE IT WORTHWHILE



Above: There are inconsistencies with the writing and voice performance. Brilliant moments contrast with instances where characters you are supposed to like come off as annoying.

LET IT GO

Just Dance 2015

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Wii U, PS3, Xbox 360, Wii
ORIGIN: Europe
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99 ($49.99)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

KINECT SPORTS RIVALS





DANCE CENTRAL 2

AS GOOD AS

It's possible to sit still through an entire song on *Just Dance 2015* and have it rate you OK or even Good for some of the dance moves. That might sound damning, but it's clear that the *Just Dance* series, with its origin in waggling Wii Remotes, is unconcerned with accuracy. This version doesn't even have difficulty levels, clearing away as much as possible of what's between you and the dancing, and encouraging you to jump right in.

Another benefit of *Just Dance 2015*'s blasé attitude to accuracy is that it invites you to bring in multiple players, up to six with Kinect and four on other platforms. Dancing games are always better with friends (unless your friends are professional dancers), and *Just Dance 2015* emphasises that with a range of routines designed specifically for multiplayer.

As well as those that cast some players as backing dancers, there are also dances specifically choreographed for a group. *Let It Go*, from Disney's *Frozen*, is a dramatic theatre school style dance for a budding Anna and Elsa, while the *Tetris* theme has four players that need to work together.

The graphics that play behind the fluorescent-outlined dancers are vibrant, and many of the music videos have a great sense of humour, like the *Holding Out For A Hero* dance that has you role-play a muscly man with a sword on a platform flying through space, occasionally kicking watermelons in half.



Above: The *Tetris* dance has four players – each representing one colour/block – perform different moves at the same time, creating a group dance that might involve getting on your hands and knees or being carried around.



CONNECTED

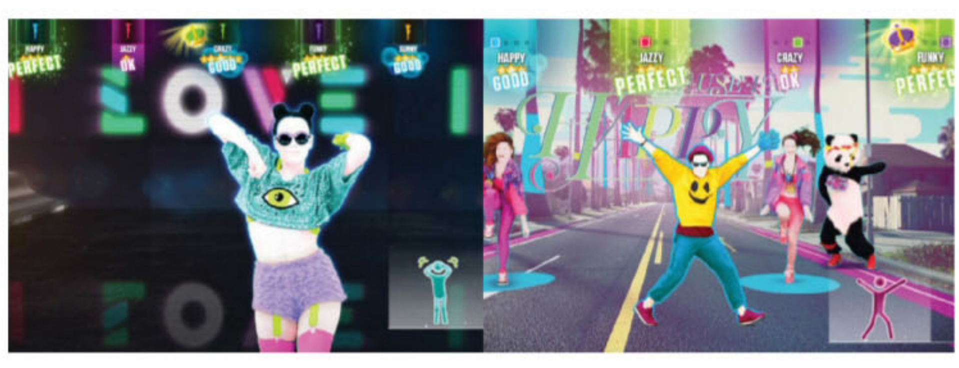
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

PHONE IT IN: Those without a camera for their console can still play, with the snappily named Just Dance 2015 Motion Controller app. Sync it up and dance away.

Though there are plenty of songs available, there are more to unlock, including alternative routines for nine of them. Also unlockable are cartoony avatars for your "dance card", which represents you when other players check you out online. You'll see another player's avatar if you add "challengers" to your game, which is just a way to add a real person's score to the top of your screen to give you a sense of competition.

The returning World Dance Floor feels more direct, as you hop into an ongoing playlist with other players from around the world, moving up and down a leader board in real time, but still sticks to avatars. Where you get a real sense of other players across the world is with Community Remix, which replaces the music video in the background of a dance to a series of clips of other players (or their kids, or their pets) performing the routine.

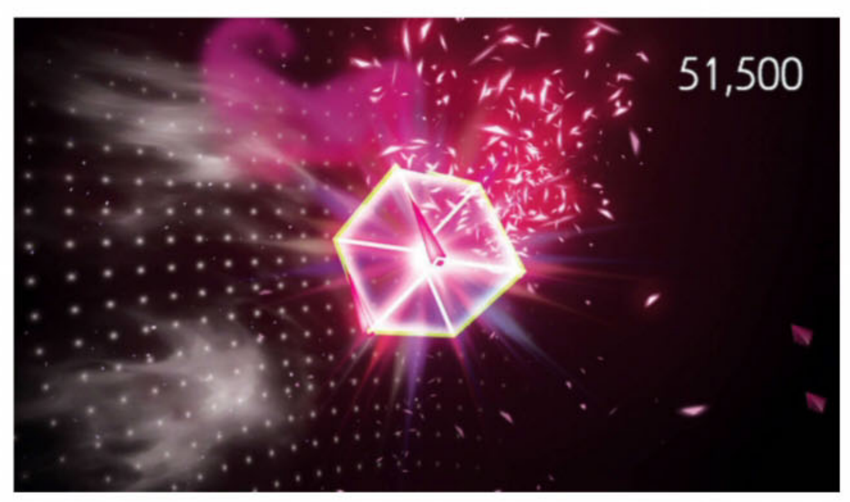
Community Remix is the only really new feature that *Just Dance 2015* adds, but then it's difficult to see where the series could go from here. Without rival *Dance Central*'s concerns for accuracy, all a Just Dance game needs is to be accessible and immediately fun, and this new edition pulls that off with style.



Above: Kinect can apparently track six dancers at once in *Just Dance 2015*, though the accuracy with which it does so is questionable.

VERDICT 7/10
A NON-JUDGMENTAL DANCING PARTNER

Below: *Fantasia: Music Evolved* looks stunning. Each of its diverse, beautifully drawn areas are interactive planes that can be brought to life with your touch. We only wish there were more areas to explore.





DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Disney Interactive
DEVELOPER: Harmonix
PRICE: £42.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

JUST DANCE 2015



DANCE CENTRAL SPOTLIGHT

JUST LIKE

NOTHING CAN SAVE KINECT NOW

Fantasia: Music Evolved

***Fantasia: Music Evolved* is Harmonix's most experimental project to date.** Now that's saying something: this *is* the studio that found success in making us party to club hits in our living rooms, after all. Sadly, though, *Fantasia* has arrived a little later than expected on Xbox One – months after Microsoft has all but abandoned Kinect – and so, despite its good ideas, it's a game that struggles to make its intentions or audience clear.

As a sequel to the classic Disney animated film from back in the Forties, *Fantasia: Music Evolved* does an excellent job of capturing the tone and feel of the original source material. As apprentice to sorcerer Yen Sid, you are tasked with navigating beautifully drawn and diverse themed worlds to rid them of the 'Noise'. No, that doesn't mean Cannibal Corpse has invaded the soundtrack; the 'Noise' is a corrupting force that you'll need to irradiate with quick movements, rhythmic flailing and all of the stamina that you can possibly muster.

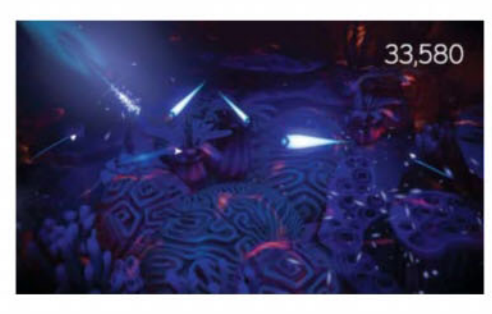
If you thought that *Dance Central* was exhausting, prepare to feel your arms really burn as you wildly swing them like a possessed teenager conducting an acid trip-induced symphony. As pre-determined motion cues appear on the screen you're tasked with punching, swiping and tracking your hands through the air in time to the varied 30-song soundtrack. Be warned, though: while the game is built around celebrating the act of music creation with any and all players, regardless of skill, *Fantasia* revels in making you look an idiot to anyone that might be fortunate enough to catch you playing.

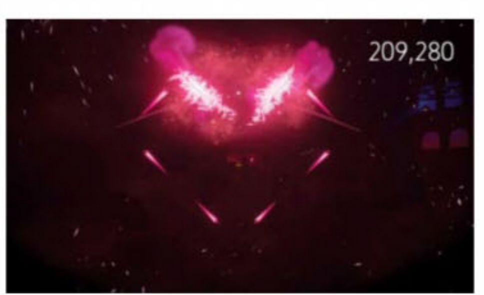
When you dig into *Fantasia*'s simple mechanics, the real magic begins. Once you've cleared the irksome campaign, you'll have the opportunity to create your own remixes. Each song is packaged with two additional variations – classical compositions layered with drum and bass, for example – and it's then up to you to mix and switch musical cues to create your own monstrous mash-ups. It's easy to get swept up in your own creations, especially if you invite a second player into the process with *Fantasia*'s co-op mode. Even when you hopelessly butcher a track with off-kilter sounding beats, you'll still struggle to not smile at your own audiovisual creations.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WAS IT ON THE RIGHT CONSOLE?: *Fantasia* clearly needs motion controls, but we wonder whether it would have worked better with Sony's Move peripheral.

Fantasia: Music Evolved is a fun, if not too forgiving, experience – but it's still one that feels hampered by the hardware itself. Like every Kinect-required game that precedes it, *Fantasia* stumbles as Kinect often fails to pick up basic inputs and commands. With the peripheral no longer mandatory, it's tough to see who *Fantasia* is for: too easy for adults and, with no real difficulty levels, potentially too difficult for kids. If you own Kinect then it's worth a play, but don't rush out to purchase the camera if you don't already have one in your cupboard.





VERDICT 6/10
A BREATH OF FRESH AIR IN THE AILING RHYTHM-ACTION GENRE

A WELL-EXECUTED EXPERIMENT

Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishments

It all makes sense now. It's taken eight games and a decade of painfully slow iteration, but Frogwares has finally nailed its vision of Sherlock Holmes. No mere detective, he is a 19th Century reimagining of Judge Dredd. Sure, the stomping grounds of Mega City One have been exchanged for the cobbled streets of Victorian London, but as far as the would-be criminals in *Crimes & Punishments* are concerned, Sherlock Holmes is judge, jury and executioner.

The *Adventures Of Sherlock Holmes* series has traditionally struggled to appropriately empower the player. We understand the difficulty: how do you make a point-and-click puzzle game challenging *and* engaging across a long narrative when you're embodying a man that has all of the answers? Frogwares has tackled this in two distinct – not to mention effective – ways, in spite of its clearly low budget. *Crimes & Punishments* presents six short cases to sleuth through, avoiding the pitfalls of a longer, laboured narrative. Previous entries too often felt like an impenetrable sprawl of tangents and insane clue-connections, but this outing remains tight and consistent throughout – a welcome change of pace.

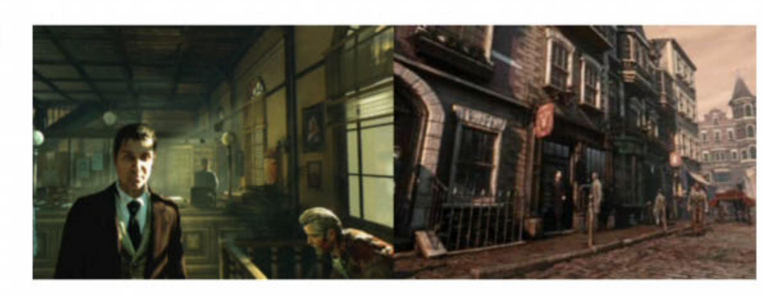
Where *Crimes & Punishments* truly succeeds is in how it quickly and effectively gives you the tools and powers to make you feel like the world's greatest detective – but it also gives you the power to fail. Once you've investigated a crime scene, interrogated witnesses and gathered clues, it's up to you to close the case, not the game running on deduction auto-pilot.

You need to make sense of the information before you, point the finger of blame at one of the suspects and hope to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's ghost that you haven't sentenced the wrong person to a life behind bars, or even the noose, should you feel that way inclined. Scotland Yard treats your word as gospel, so you'd better be sure that you've looked at the case from every angle. Or don't bother – it's really up to you. Those with an off-kilter moral compass can run riot with the archaic Victorian justice system; sentencing every badly animated character that looks you down the wrong way to the worst punishment. If you can assemble a believable narrative from the facts, you can reach an entirely different conclusion to a case than another player.

Crimes & Punishments isn't perfect, and you'll need to overlook some fairly glaring technical shortcomings, but if you enjoy the source material and fancy testing the full extent of Sherlock Holmes' powers of deduction, then you won't find a better interactive representation of the character. It might have taken Frogwares eight games, but it finally feels like the studio has taken the first step to delivering something truly genre-defining.

DETAILS

FORMAT: XBOX ONE
OTHER FORMATS: Multi
ORIGIN: Ukraine
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: FROGWARES
PRICE: £42.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PERFECTLY PACED: Mysteries can be investigated and solved in a single sitting, which is far more entertaining than the hours of tedium clogging up the previous games.

BETTER THAN

MURDERED: SOUL SUSPECT





WORSE THAN

LA NOIRE

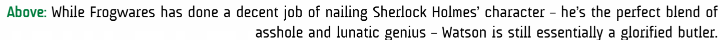


VERDICT 7/10

A CONSIDERED, SURPRISINGLY FUN, PUZZLING ADVENTURE







Above: While Frogwares has done a decent job of nailing Sherlock Holmes' character – he's the perfect blend of asshole and lunatic genius – Watson is still essentially a glorified butler.



Inset: The success rate of dunks and layups borders on the comical, which is great for highlight reel packages but less welcome when it comes to game balancing. Simply put: if you want to win in *NBA Live 15*, drive to the basket every time.

FUMBLES THE REBOUND…

NBA Live 15

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: EA Sports
DEVELOPER: EA Tiburon
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



The good news is that this year's *NBA Live* is superior to last season's dreadful, embarrassing effort. Its suite of on-court options is expanded, player models look better and there's a general aura of basketball celebration that teeters between charming and seductive. At the very least, EA Tiburon seems focused on improving a series that has been mired by so much underachievement and controversy in recent years that it's a miracle it's still clinging to life at all.

Inescapable, however, are comparisons to the superlative *NBA 2K*. After all, most only have time for one basketball game a year and it makes sense to opt for the worthiest candidate. It's here, under the looming shadow of *2K15*'s splendour, then, that *Live 15* feels woefully inadequate and underdeveloped. The two competitors continue to feel as though they're playing in different leagues.

While the players on show here look fantastic when static, the quality of animation continues to disappoint. Clunky and at times unnatural, there are few things better at breaking sports simulator immersion than players that frequently look as though they're caught in some inexplicable slow-motion alternate reality. Worse is the sensation of déjà vu that sets in after only a few games, such is the frequency at which animations repeat.

Then again, perhaps this isn't trying to achieve immersion at all. Certainly, the way the matches play out tends to bear little resemblance to the NBA of reality. Scoring in the paint with dunks and layups is ridiculously easy, almost any player of mediocre ability able to beat the world's best defenders. When you're defending your own basket, the same remains true, with such scoring attempts being near impossible to stop.

Conversely, shooting jump shots is overly fussy and irritating. As is standard practice across basketball games, shooting involves pressing the relevant button to begin the motion and then realising it to send the ball to the net. However, here, the correct release is in no way linked to the shooting animations applied to players. This creates an unsettling disconnect between your actions and the visuals, in that you need to ignore what your player is doing in order to time shots perfectly.

Variety of game modes doesn't improve things either, there being nothing here that we've not seen in other sports games. You can play as an individual or the entire team in franchise modes, dip into the now-standard Ultimate Team, play quick matches from the actual NBA schedule or try your luck online. All of these options are welcome, but none are exciting.

And yet, despite the problems, this still remains an undeniable improvement over *Live 14*. That might not be saying much, but at least it provides some hope for the franchise's future.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PLAYER SMARTS: AI is better; less frustration from idiotic movement up the court during fast breaks.
WELL GROOMED: Inconsistent animations persist, but the models themselves are excellent.

BETTER THAN NBA LIVE 14



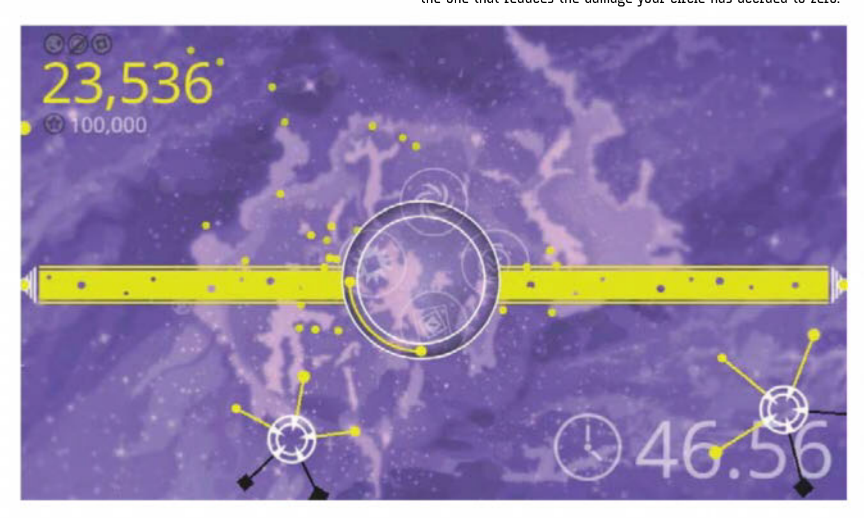
WORSE THAN NBA 2K15

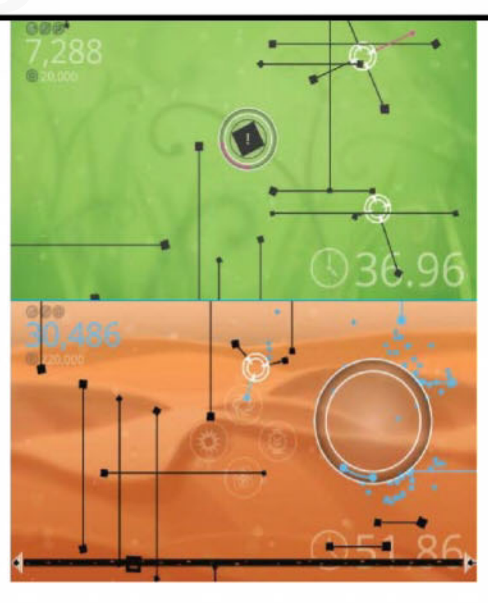


VERDICT 5/10

STILL MANY, MANY CHAMPIONSHIPS BEHIND NBA 2K

Below: The ability to shift size is the best power-up in the game; of the other four available you'll seldom go past the one that reduces the damage your circle has accrued to zero.





Below: The one-shot nature of the Daily Challenge level offers a buzz of excitement that the linear progression enforced by the conventional levels struggle to match.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Red Phantom Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £6.19
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

AS GOOD AS
ENTWINED



WORSE THAN
TXK

TIME WELL SPENT?

Minutes

Despite its functional title, *Minutes* is less about the notion of time than it is about the facets of design. Outside of the key tenet that each one of its 60 levels lasts for as many seconds, it's the minimalist simplicity of its construction that ultimately informs its identity. It's this sheer nakedness of design that is both to its credit and its detriment in equal measure, as while it appears clear enough it lacks the deeper complexity that would give it a little more, much-needed longevity.

Its puzzle premise is simple: move a circular cursor around the screen to absorb various different coloured lines, orbs and beams to gain points while avoiding the black equivalents, which will deal damage to your circle, eventually causing it to explode. Its uncomplicated pick-up-and-play nature lends it an early charm, but while it occasionally reaches for a bullet-hell state, its pace is too pedestrian and its difficulty spikes are too reliant on power-ups – rather than genuine feats of dexterity – to be truly classed as such.

Each level has a three-tiered score target, the lowest of which must be achieved before you can move on to the next level, while the highest will likely elude you until you've earned a full complement of power-ups. However, such is the sparseness of its visual design and the lack of audio variety that there's little to tempt you back to earlier levels once you've passed them. Only the most avid of trophy hunters will attempt the perfect, damage-free runs that remain when the minimum completion requirements of every level have been met.

Early on, you can expand or shrink your circle by one step, with a larger circle netting more points from collected colours than its smaller form, but bringing with it the increased difficulty of avoiding those dreaded black lines. Later on, you are able to scale up and down through several sizes, as you drift around obstacles and expand your size to maximise scores. This multistep size-shifting is by far the most interesting of all of *Minutes'* power-ups and could have been fully unlocked from the beginning of the game to promote skilful play, instead of opting for gated progress and backtracking.

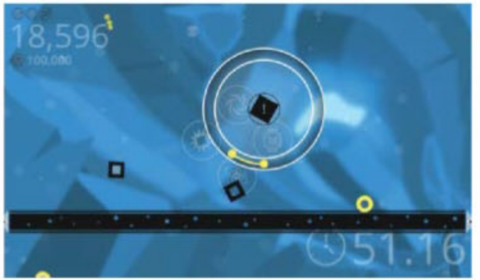
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LINEARITY: While the notion of unlocking one level after another fits the linear nature of the game's title, we would have preferred to see groups of levels open up to offer more choice.

Free of clutter and fuss, almost everything you need to know about *Minutes* is laid out before you, but its simplicity counts against it in the long term. Its few fresh concepts are introduced too slowly across its 60 levels and the lack of visual variety causes many of them to blend into one as the simple eventually gives way to the mundane. Ultimately, *Minutes* is a distraction suitable for killing time on a long journey, but as with any temporary time-sink, it fails to ever truly engage and so quickly fades from memory as soon as you put it down. A little more depth would have gone a long way.







A SOLID, IF UNSPECTACULAR, ARCADE PUZZLER





"It's a surprisingly deep game considering its core simplicity, and as a game developer, you can always appreciate that!"

TOM CHILTON, BLIZZARD, LEAD DESIGNER (WORLD OF WARCRAFT)

WHY I ♥...

PUZZLE & DRAGONS

TOM CHILTON, BLIZZARD, LEAD DESIGNER (WORLD OF WARCRAFT)

I am a big fan of Puzzle & Dragons. *I play it on my phone all the time, and I've probably been on it for about a year and a half now. It's fun; it can be aggravating and frustrating also, but I really dig it overall. It's essentially a really great blend of* Pokémon *elements and some other RPG elements, too. It's a surprisingly deep game considering its core simplicity, and as a game developer, you can always appreciate that!*

RETRO

NO.155



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BEHIND THE SCENES



Under a glut of 3D run-and-frag games, one developer aimed for six degrees of 3D freedom and made one of the most iconic Nineties space adventures

Released: 1994 (shareware)
1995 (full release)
Format: PC, Macintosh, Acorn Archimedes, PlayStation
Publisher: Interplay
Key Staff: Matt Toschlog (designer/coder), Mike Kulas (designer/coder), Che-Yuan Wang (designer/coder/level designer), John Slagel (coder), Adam Pletcher (graphic artist), Mark Dinse and Jasen Whiteside (level designers), Josh White (story and 3D modelling) and Rob Huebner (multiplayer coder loaned from Interplay)

DESPITE A FULL RELEASE in 1995, the origins of *Descent* can be traced all the way back to 1986. "I started in the games industry in '86, working at Sublogic Corporation," begins Matt Toschlog, co-creator of the 3D space shooter. "I worked on various titles including *Flight Simulator* for the Color Computer 3 and *Jet* for Amiga, Atari ST and Mac." Working alongside Toschlog was Mike Kulas and when the pair brainstormed an idea for what would eventually become *Descent*, they decided the concept was too good to let anyone else develop it; thus Parallax Software was formed in the June of 1993. "*Descent* was from an idea of combining the flight simulator games that we'd worked on at Sublogic with the tunnel crawling of *Ultima Underworld*, on which I played a small role," explains Toschlog, while Kulas recalls the arcade game *Xybots* (a cabinet resided at the La Bamba, their favourite Mexican restaurant) as having a direct influence on some of the themes and style of *Descent*. And yet surprisingly, id Software's famous FPS had no direct bearing on the game, and even hampered its development. "We didn't know about *Doom* until after we'd started *Descent*, and having originally signed the game to Apogee, they dropped us when they realised the game wasn't a *Doom* clone," says Toschlog.

A formidable setback, but one that didn't deter the two young men – such was their belief in the project. "We took a couple of months to prepare a good demo and sent submissions to every publisher we could think of; Interplay really got the game and seemed like a great publisher," says Toschlog. Parallax's founders became project leaders and programmers with Kulas writing the game's texture mapper and AI, and Toschlog the 3D geometry engine and physics system – essentially the basic building blocks of their vision. Yet it was obvious that for a game of *Descent*'s scope, they'd need assistance. Toschlog recalls: "We hired John Slagel and Che-Yuan Wang pretty much straight away and both of them contributed to programming. Yuan also became our first level designer." When the technical side had proceeded enough, an artist, Adam Pletcher, was also signed to the team. These first four men formed the core team behind *Descent*. "John and I were hired in June 1993 and there was a one-page treatment called *Miner*, written by Mike and Matt," adds Che-Yuan Wang. "When Apogee dropped the project, we shopped it around under its then title of *Inferno*." At the Chicago Summer CES show in 1993, Wang and the team saw Interplay demo the 3DO version of *Out Of This World* (known as *Another World in Europe*) and pitched the game to them. "We'd had no funding until that point, so the team really came together and pushed our way through that tough period," says Wang.

The origin of *Descent* can be closely associated with a technical idea. "The portal engine was mostly my idea and came out of discussions I had with Doug Church on how the *Ultima Underworld* renderer worked," says Toschlog. "*Underworld* used a different technique but it got me thinking about other ways to solve the problem of limiting the amount of geometry that had to be drawn each frame." Toschlog and Kulas' solution was to utilise cubes (or segments) that would all trace out from each of its six sides to see if it was connected to another segment. If the side was connected, and at least partly visible, the connected segment would then be added to the render list. "The other important part was a 2D clipping algorithm that checked each connection to see if the portal into the next segment was visible in the 2D window that the user was looking through," adds Toschlog. John Slagel, who worked on various facets of the game such as the 2D graphics layer, level editing and the data packager, recalls the game's structure was in place even before he joined Parallax: "It was the key to everything. Both Mike and Matt had these little yellow wooden blocks on their desks with all the vertices and sides numbered so that all the systems used consistent conventions for the face and vertex ordering." The segments were also vital when it came to the enemy AI, with Kulas himself writing the algorithms that used the segment structures to create a path for the robots to follow on their own. "I think we originally envisioned the game mainly as being a connection of tunnels," says Kulas. "The editor was very primitive and, like any tool, tended to be designed towards the vision of the creator. But our designers created the rooms and gave it a greater sense of place and it's wonderful that the levels turned out so differently than how we initially imagined."

In addition to the segment technology, *Descent* also employed 3D polygon meshes to represent the enemy robots. At a time when even 3D games used mainly flat images for sprites, this was a significant upgrade. "We went back and forth for a while on how the enemies would be rendered," confesses Toschlog, "and we tried using sprites consisting of pre-rendered views from a number of angles but they just didn't look good enough." Slagel was heavily involved in their creation. "Matt specified a binary format for me to store the 3D mesh data's BSP [Binary Space Partitioning – tech ed.] tree and I wrote a tool to calculate this. We had to use a BSP tree because we used a software rasteriser, so no z-buffer, and we had to draw from back to front." The coding team tried to extend the use of the meshes to items and miners, but this was abandoned as either unnecessary or unsolvable with the animation that was required for the miners.

All very clever stuff, muses **games™**, but we can't help but think it came with its own set of issues and complications. Recalls Slagel: "The biggest problem was the tech at the time. We wanted to go to a higher resolution



Take out the reactor and get the hell out of there!

DESCENT FACT FILE

A few info snippets you may not know

■ The game was originally called *Miner*, and then *Inferno*, before the team chose *Descent*.

■ A Sega Saturn port was commenced but abandoned because, according to coder John Slagel, it 'sucked'.

■ Matt Toschlog went on to direct all of *Descent*'s sequels.

■ He recalls being flattered by clones such as *Forsaken*, even wearing a *Forsaken* t-shirt as he demoed *Descent 3* at E3.

■ Interplay sent a programmer named Rob Huebner to Parallax to help with multiplayer network coding.

■ In order to assist player orientation, Toschlog and Kulas encouraged the designers to make the floor more obvious, such as using tracks.

■ John Slagel coded the PlayStation port. "It was pretty tough. And we had to support Japanese so I had to go to Interplay Japan to finish the port so we could get it passed by Sony."

■ With the shareware version shipping in December 1994 and the full release three months later, *Descent* took around 21 months to create.

■ The team enjoyed multiplayer so much they often spent more time playing it than creating it. Che-Yuan Wang says, "The play sessions helped us polish the levels and the gameplay."

■ Wang also cites scrolling shooter *Side Arms* as an influence, particularly with *Descent*'s weaponry.

■ The miners were originally supposed to help the player and Interplay used actors to create videos. "They were so bad they were funny!" says John Slagel. Unsurprisingly, the clips weren't used in the game.



■ Left to right: Che-Yuan Wang, Matt Toschlog, Jason Whiteside, Mark Dinse, Adam Pletcher, Rob Huebner, Mike Kulas, John Slagel and Mark Allender.



■ The team posed for the same picture at a reunion in 2011.

or hardware accelerators *so* bad, but the hardware and software just wasn't there. We developed *Descent* on DOS PCs, 80x25 text, and sometimes with no mouse since the driver took up so much space in lower RAM!" Yet, despite a late tweak in the texture mapping code that caused extra work for the level design team and some hectic last-minute multiplayer development ("We tried to tell Interplay we didn't want to do it, but they wisely insisted that we had to," admits Toschlog), *Descent*'s long-planned engine coped well with most of the elements that were thrown at it. Other factors tended to cause the team sleepless nights, with Toschlog conceding that creatively the biggest challenge was coming up with robots and levels that were progressively more difficult and compelling enough to keep gamers interested, and Kulas recalling the major external tribulations they faced: "We were building a company at the same time as we were building a game. The biggest stresses I remember were about satisfying our publisher, dealing with our contract being cancelled (by Apogee) and keeping things moving forward. Other than multiplayer I don't remember thinking any development issues were frightening. We were fortunate to hire some very talented people." The camaraderie and belief of the *Descent* team was never better shown than when Apogee pulled the plug. Says Slagel: "When Apogee dropped us Mike and Matt said, 'we can't pay you anymore, you can look for other jobs or you can work as long as you want and have your PC for pay. But we are going to finish this game.' Everyone stayed and when they found a publisher they back-paid us our hours. At that point, if we weren't sure before, I think we all knew we'd do anything for those guys. We were a pretty tight group."

■■■ As completion neared, everybody was convinced they had something special on their hands. Maybe *too* special given the high-spec PC likely needed to run *Descent* optimally. "We were absolutely worried," winces Toschlog, "As we wanted to make the game as complex and detailed as possible, but also we wanted people to be able to run it!" An option to change detail levels helped in this respect, but ultimately *Descent* would require a hefty 486 PC to run at a good pace. In spite of this, the game received glowing reviews in the majority of magazines, although many reviewers complained of constantly getting lost and the subsequent motion



■ Each set of *Descent*'s levels take place on a planet within the solar system. Here's an appropriately fiery Mercury.

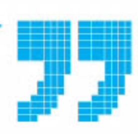
Descent certainly didn't want for action and spectacular explosions.





Despite the limitations of the Playstation controller, Descent is incredibly well done. Doom-fatigued players looking for the next challenge will want to take this Descent

GamePro, 1996



sickness. "We were definitely aware of this issue," recalls Wang, "and in fact there was one time when Mike tweaked the pitch rate on the ship and the entire office started feeling sick!" John Slagel remembers Parallax and Interplay using the ill-effect for marketing. "It was a fun thing to say… 'so 3D you'll get vertigo'. I think it was because people just weren't used to 3D games." However, as Toschlog states: "It was always our intention to make a game that was fully 3D and a certain amount of disorientation was a natural result. In the end the game *was* too confusing or nausea-inducing for some players, but really rewarded those players who got it." Kulas recollects the original concept of simple connected tunnels, an idea that morphed into tunnels plus rooms plus several exits as *Descent*'s level designers got to work. "Then it became very confusing. I'm not sure we had early plans for the automap, but it became necessary once the levels got so complex."

Late in 1994, as was customary with PC games at the time, the shareware version of *Descent* was unleashed upon the games-playing public. It was hugely popular, providing several months for people to experience and learn what the game was about before the full version was released. "*Descent* wasn't like any other game out there at the time," explains Toschlog, "so having those three months for people to figure it out made a real difference." Kulas,



Just blown up the reactor? Hope you know your way out…

"INTERPLAY REALLY GOT THE GAME AND SEEMED LIKE A GREAT PUBLISHER" MATT TOSCHLOG

however, saw the shareware concept as a particular double-edged sword for *Descent*. "It was helpful because I didn't believe that all the necessary people at Interplay had an appropriately high opinion of the game," he says, "but on the other hand I think giving away seven levels was far too much and probably cost some sales. I don't think we can complain though."

Looking back at *Descent* today, the team are justifiably proud of what they created. "Oh yeah," chimes Matt Toschlog. "We had this interesting idea for a game and never imagined that it would strike such a chord with so many people." They also feel lucky to have worked on such an innovative and renowned title so early in their careers. "I still can't believe I was a part of something so great," beams Slagel. "It'll never have the fame of *Doom* or *Quake*, but it's definitely something we can be proud of. *Descent* is known all over the world and holds a solid place in the history of gaming and we dedicated our lives back then to it. It was so exciting as we all knew the game was ground-breaking." But we leave the final words to co-creator Mike Kulas, who describes with pride this flawed yet brilliant game: "*Descent* is quite an odd thing, kind of an evolutionary detour. When I played it years later I would see all kinds of problems. There are things about it that are simply wrong, but I thought it held together very well. It was kinda ragged in its graphics, balance and aspects of gameplay – but it was original, fun and fresh. We were, and still are, immensely pleased with it."

Our special thanks to Matt Toschlog, Mike Kulas, John Slagel and Che-Yuan Wang for their time.



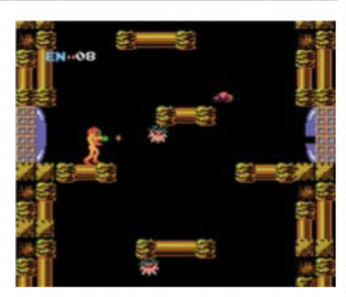
THE RETRO GUIDE TO… METROID

She might not be as well known as Mario or Donkey Kong, but Samus Aran has certainly picked up a number of loyal fans over the past 28 years. **games™** looks back at her impressive 11-game career

METROID IS ONE of Nintendo's least publicised franchises. While there was a flurry of activity in the early to mid Noughties, there have been no new games in four years. In the space of 28 years just 11 main games have appeared, a paltry amount of releases when you look at how quickly franchises like *Assassin's Creed* and *Call Of Duty* are spat out – and yet the adventures of Samus Aran have shifted over 17 million units.

It's an impressive number, until you realise that even low-tier Nintendo franchises such as Kirby have shifted over 34 million units. These lower numbers and a bigger focus on Western gamers (*Super Metroid* was the last game in the series to launch in Japan first) might be why Nintendo has been far more cautious with the franchise's direction compared to some of its others. And yet, despite a lack of games, the series has always managed to feel fresh and exciting…





METROID 1986

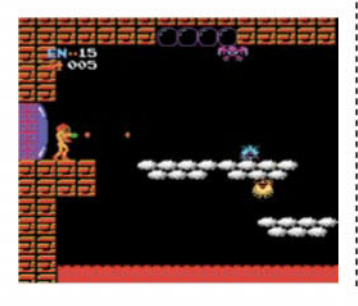
SYSTEM: NES

Metroid arrived a few shorts months after *The Legend Of Zelda*, and like Shigeru Miyamoto's game, it made its debut on the 8-bit Famicom. While both titles are adventure games at their core, their approach couldn't be more different. Where *Zelda* opts for a fantasy approach, with a sprawling game world to explore, *Metroid* delivers a claustrophobic side-on adventure. Both games are classics, but we'd argue that the journey of bounty hunter Samus Arun is far more ambitious. The real beauty of *Metroid* is in the organic structure that initially offers only small sections of the huge planet of Zebes to explore, but as Samus searches for Metroids, she gains access to new items and weapons that not only give the player new gameplay mechanics to master, but also unlock previously unavailable parts of the game world.

Nowadays, backtracking in games can be a painful, laborious process, but in *Metroid* it was encouraged. You didn't mind the endless revisiting of past stages, either, because Samus' world just drips with atmosphere, thanks to *Metroid*'s imaginative sprite design and evocative soundtrack. Yoshio Sakamoto, who co-directed the game and worked as its character designer, revealed the team was heavily influenced by Ridley Scott's *Alien*, and while *Metroid* rarely scares you, it does make for a surprisingly bleak, unsettling experience.

Metroid is also memorable for its multiple endings and female protagonist, although you were unaware of her gender until you completed the game. It went on to shift just short of 3 million units, and was re-released in 2002 as part of the GBA's Classic NES series. A surprisingly effective 3D version is also currently available on 3DS.







METROID II: RETURN OF SAMUS 1991

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

After the sheer scale of *Metroid*, its sequel had a lot to live up to. *Metroid II* might not have reached the same heights as its predecessor, but it remains a resoundingly solid adventure and one of the best examples of the genre on Nintendo's 8-bit handheld. Where *Metroid* was a more brooding, much slower-paced adventure game, *Metroid II* feels a lot more action-packed – the *Aliens*, to *Metroid*'s *Alien* as it were. It still shares many elements with *Metroid*, but the need to clear a certain number of Metroids before Samus can move to the next stage makes *Return Of Samus* feel more arcade-like.



SUPER METROID 1994

SYSTEM: SNES

For many, this remains the best game in the *Metroid* canon. While there's certainly an argument for it to be placed behind the astonishing piece of work that is *Metroid Prime*, it's not hard to understand why so many consider *Super Metroid* to be a 16-bit masterpiece. Notable improvements over previous games include the ability to enable and disable weapons and items via the inventory screen, the ability to move backwards and shoot (far more useful than it sounds) and an extremely useful mini-map. *Super Metroid* almost undid the series, as Nintendo let the franchise stagnate for eight long years, seemingly unsure of what direction to take it in.

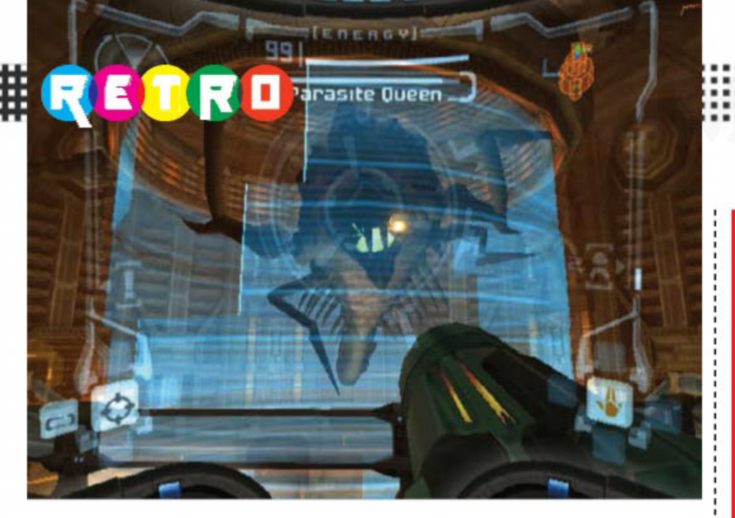




METROID FUSION 2002

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE

It's typical – you wait eight years for a new *Metroid* game to appear then two come along at once. While *Metroid* games were quite oppressive to play, due to their atmosphere, *Fusion* could be downright terrifying. This was largely due to the introduction of a deadly parasitic organism called SA-X that hunts Samus down at certain sections of the game. *Metroid* games always made you feel like an underdog (until you retrieve all your latent powers), but being stalked through the dingy corridors by a virtually unstoppable fully-armed clone of yourself was incredibly tense and could be just as traumatic as the well-choreographed boss encounters. *Fusion* was arguably one of the more challenging games in the series, so it's handy that Samus received a number of useful new skills. While she could grab onto ledges and climb ladders and railings, her most useful new trick was the ability to absorb any nearby X Parasites, boosting her health, missile and bomb supplies.



METROID PRIME 2002

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE

Metroid Prime could have been a mess. Nintendo had been struggling to create a 3D *Metroid* for years, bypassing the N64 completely and eventually setting its sights on the GameCube. Texas-based developer Retro Studios was given the unenviable task of creating Samus' first 3D adventure and began work on a third-person action game. Shigeru Miyamoto wasn't happy with the game's direction, insisting on a first-person perspective and causing Retro Studios to virtually scrap all its existing assets. Many developers would have quit right there, but rather than give up, Retro Studios created one of the most astonishing adventures to ever appear on Nintendo's diminutive console.

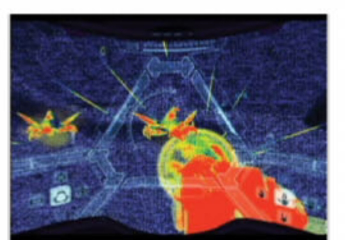
Metroid Prime is not in any sense a traditional first-person shooter. Samus' ability to lock on to enemies and evade incoming attacks immediately made it stand apart, while the carefully balanced controls made the numerous platform sections incredibly easy to pull off. While it's predominantly first-person, Samus' Morph Ball ability utilises a third-person perspective, which is typically used for the few puzzle-like elements found throughout the game. It features the same organic

"PRIME'S ENVIRONMENTS STILL STAND UP TODAY"

exploratory approach of previous games, but introduces new gameplay mechanics in the form of a number of different visors that Samus must switch between. In addition to thermal imaging and X-Ray vision, Samus can also scan pretty much anything she encounters, from enemies to locations. Scanning not only reveals weak points in bosses, but also slowly unlocks *Metroid Prime*'s well-crafted story, which is arguably one of the best in the series. The constant switching is also found in *Metroid*'s combat, with Samus changing between plasma cannons as the game progresses.

In addition to its absorbing gameplay, *Prime* is incredible to look at, with lush welcoming environments that still stand up today. From the icy wastes of the Phendrana Drifts, to the gloomy depths of the Phazon Mines, *Prime* is continually a joy to explore, with little touches like explosions momentarily reflecting Samus' face in her visor only adding to the atmosphere. A huge success for Nintendo, it also allowed linkage to *Metroid Fusion*, unlocking a number of bonuses, including the original *Metroid*.

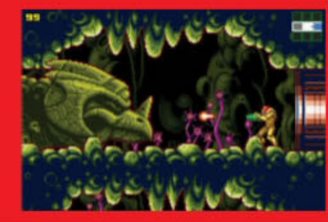




METROID: ZERO MISSION 2004

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE

This is easily one of gaming's best remakes, matched only by Capcom's astonishing GameCube update of *Resident Evil*. It's effectively a reimagining of the original NES game rather than a complete remake, built with the Metroid Fusion engine after director Yoshiro Sakamoto decided against porting *Super Metroid*. While many sections will feel instantly familiar, there is enough variance to the stage layouts to ensure that even veterans will find the return to Zebes feels fresh and different. While some of Samus' later moves have been retrofitted into the game, it's the final leg of *Zero Mission* that makes the most impact. The ending of the original NES game results in a brand new chapter, where Samus, captured and stripped of her power suit, must sneak around with a weedy pistol and fend off a swarm of space pirates. It might be short, but it remains a fitting example of how to update a classic.





METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES 2004

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE

The big draw for Retro Studios' *Prime* sequel was the addition of a much-touted multiplayer mode. While a nice idea, it makes for a clunky experience due to the lock-on system used and paltry amount of gameplay modes. In fact, it proves that the *Metroid Prime* games *aren't* FPS games, despite the viewpoint.

Echoes has Samus switching between two parallel dimensions known as Light and Dark Aether. Samus' health continually deteriorates while she's in contact with Dark Aether, causing her to seek out the small safe zones found there. It adds a little needed additional layer of difficulty to an already tough game. It's a pity that *Echoes* feels so tough in places, as the actual plot (which continues directly on from *Prime*) is extremely strong, focusing on the Dark Samus created in the closing credits of Samus' previous adventure.



YOSHIO SAKAMOTO INTERVIEW

The Super Metroid director on his Super Famicom debut



How did you come to work on *Super Metroid*?
My boss [producer Makoto Kanoh] told me that *Metroid* was really popular in North America, so he encouraged me to produce a new *Metroid* game with the high-quality graphics that were becoming possible thanks to the Super Famicom. Of course I said, 'Yes, I'd like to try doing that.' The game design and concept had already been established before *Metroid II* was produced.

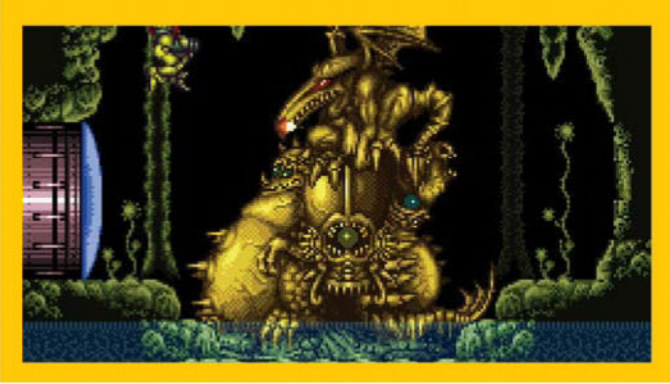
What goals did you have in mind for the game?
When it came to making another sequel, this time for the Super Famicom, we really wanted to see how far we could push the SFC.

Was it an issue that only three of the original *Metroid* team worked on the project?
The rest of the [NCL side] was made up of young trainee developers. Of course young people can be quite impertinent – and those on the *Super Metroid* team certainly were – but I think that's quite important in a way. These young people had enough about them to help us a lot. There were many different personalities in the *Super Metroid* team, which was a good thing. It was a harsh development environment, so I'm sure that some of the staff didn't enjoy the work, but generally the team was full of the 'Let's go for it!' spirit. I think that was partly because of the timing as well [with the SFC].

***Super Metroid* was your first Super Famicom game. What hurdles did you face?**
One problem with the shift to the Super Famicom was that it meant we suddenly needed a lot more sprites and artwork, so we shared the map and enemy design responsibilities throughout the team, with everyone making some input in those areas. But then doing that resulted in a complete mishmash of styles because of each designer's individual preference, so in the end I had to ask [Tomomi] Yamane to retouch everything that had been submitted, bringing it all together as one consistent design.

How did you find working with Gunpei Yokoi?
Yokoi-san, who at the time was my section chief and who always had fresh ideas, was always angry when he saw us all completely absorbed and working crazy overtime on *Super Metroid*. He came in and said, 'Are you lot trying to produce a work of art or something?' Although he was really unhappy with us, and even though he wasn't the type to dish out praise, Yokoi-san was constantly playing *Super Metroid* once we'd finished it – he was hooked.

When other developers brought their action games to Nintendo, he'd always compare them with *Super Metroid* and invariably ended up recommending the third-party developer to 'go away and play *Super Metroid*'. That's how fond he was of our game.









METROID PRIME PINBALL 2005

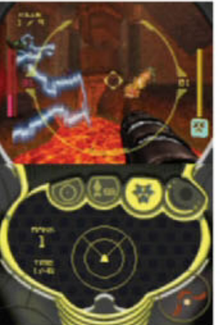
SYSTEM: NINTENDO DS

A *Metroid* pinball game sounds ridiculous until you actually play it. The included GBA Rumble pack adds little to the fun, but the DS's dual screens ensures that you can really appreciate the well-designed tables that Fuse Games has created.

As with *Metroid Prime*, the aim of *Pinball* is to require 12 artifacts, which are spread across four of the six available tables. Each table is based on a specific area of the Tallon Overworld, and is filled with clever ramps and scoring multipliers. A number of additional mini-games are included, while many of *Prime*'s boss encounters are replicated. The ball's physics are greatly improved over *Mario Pinball Land* (another Fuse Games effort) while the moody aesthetics of the GameCube adventure are perfectly replicated.

"A METROID PINBALL GAME SOUNDS RIDICULOUS UNTIL YOU PLAY IT"







METROID PRIME HUNTERS 2006

SYSTEM: NINTENDO DS

Metroid Prime Hunters gives you a good indication of what a N64-based *Metroid* might have looked like. While it can't hope to match the aesthetic brilliance of *Prime*, it looked mighty impressive on release, showcasing the graphical grunt of Nintendo's new handheld. The plot takes place between *Prime* and *Echoes*, and sees Samus embroiled in a battle with six other bounty hunters. It feels more linear than the *Prime* games, but still manages to pack a strong narrative punch. The multiplayer is equally enjoyable, with each bounty hunter having unique abilities that make them feel completely different to play. One of the early showcases of the DS (a demo was given away at launch) *Hunters*' game modes and fast-paced action proved that a *Metroid* multiplayer could work with a little thought. It's a pity then that *Hunters* is seriously hampered by its various control systems, which, while capable, never feel comfortable to use for extended amount of times. The excellent *Kid Icarus: Uprising* would suffer from a similar problem six years later.

METROID PRIME 3: CORRUPTION 2007

SYSTEM: WII

Corruption was a suitably epic end for Retro Studios' Prime trilogy. As its title suggests, gameplay mechanics revolve around Samus becoming corrupted by the events that took place in Echoes. This corruption comes in the form of the rather nifty 'Hypermode' that massively augments Samus' powers at the expense of her health. It's a fantastic spin on the risk vs reward mechanics of other games, and really spurs you on to finish this excellent adventure.

It's the sublime use of the Wii's motion controls that really makes *Corruption* stand apart from its peers though. They work amazingly well, making you feel like Samus' arm cannon is an extension of your own arm; easily silencing anyone who scoffs at Nintendo's choice of control method, the motion controls add to the overall experience, pulling you deeper into the beautifully constructed world that Retro Studios has created.





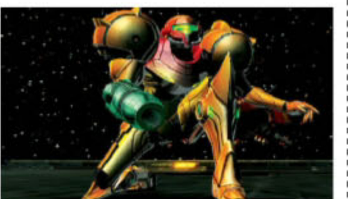
METROID PRIME: TRILOGY 2009

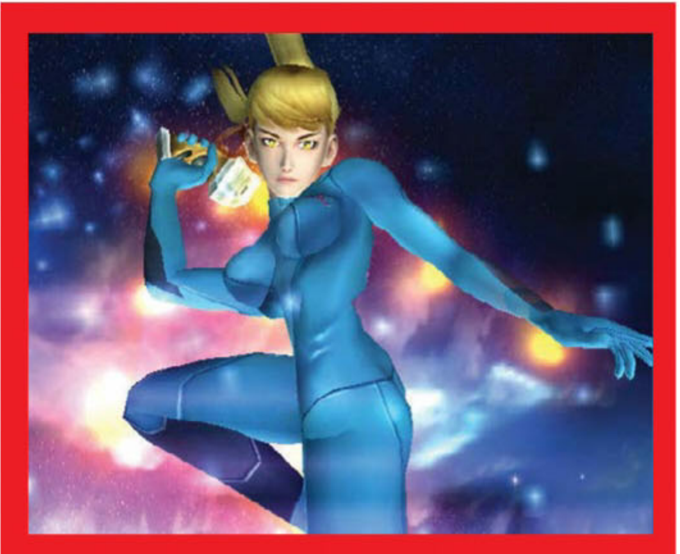
SYSTEM: WII

This entry seems a little like cheating, as it's effectively a collection of all three *Prime* games. It's so much more though as the Wii's brilliant controls for *Corruption* translate perfectly to *Prime* and *Echoes*, greatly improving them in the process. Other improvements include shorter load times, upgraded textures, bloom lighting and a general graphical upgrade to already impressive games. *Corruption*'s award system is also retro-fitted into both titles, while the boss encounters from *Echoes* have been made easier. It's a superb collection of games that now fetches a relatively high price on auction sites. Interestingly, both *Metroid Prime* and its sequel were released as separate games in Japan as part of the Wii's New Play Control! series.







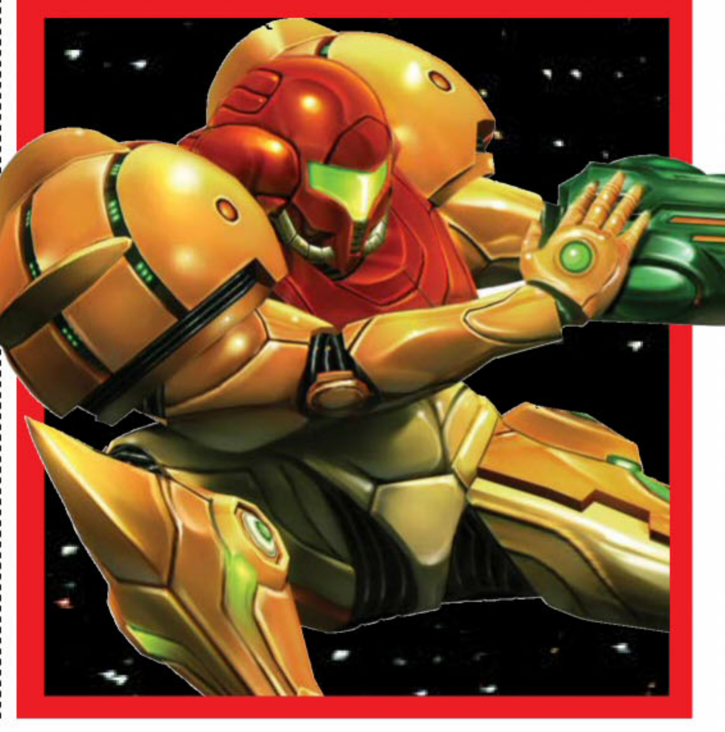


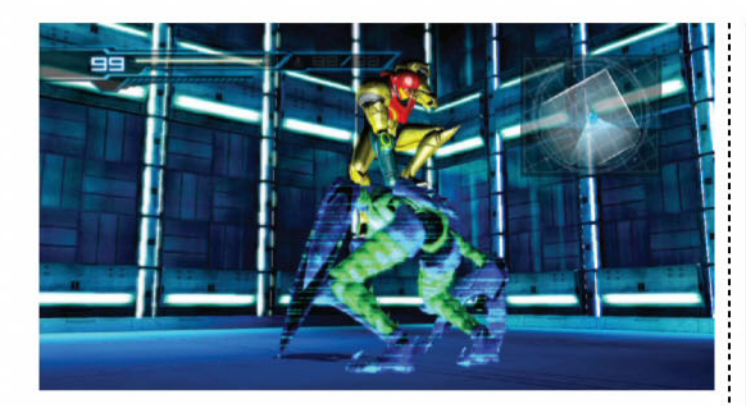
SAMUS CAMEOS

Metroid's star doesn't just collect bounties

Samus Aran made her first cameo in *Famicom Wars*. Since then, she's appeared in a variety of games, across several Nintendo consoles. She can be spied playing an upright bass at the end of NES *Tetris* and appears in the background of the Game Boy's *F-1 Race*.

Her ship turns up in *Galactic Pinball* for the ill-fated Virtual Console and she can be found resting in a bed in *Super Mario RPG: Legend Of The Seven Stars*. She's cropped up in numerous other games, from *Kirby* to *Animal Crossing* and *Dead Or Alive Dimensions*, but it's the *Super Smash Bros* series that many gamers will recognise her from, despite her own excellent games. She's been in it since the original N64 game, with her alternate Zero Suit incarnation debuting in *Super Smash Bros Brawl*.





METROID: OTHER M 2010

SYSTEM: WII

Samus' last adventure is something of a bittersweet one. While it delivers the greatest action to appear in the series to date, it also turns Samus into an extremely unlikable protagonist. Nintendo's heroine has always been tough, and was typically someone who relied more on action than words, but here's she's been reduced to a whiny petulant child, unhappy with her lot in life and appears as if she's waltzed out of a bad soap opera.

Still, if you can ignore the overly dramatic cutscenes and personality transplant, you'll discover *Other M* to be a ridiculously rollicking adventure that's filled to the brim with some of the best boss fights in the series to date. Melee combat features quite heavily in *Other M*, with Samus having access to a surprising range of moves. Turning the Wii Remote to face the screen sees the action switching to first-person, giving the player the ability to lock-on to targets and fire missiles. It's a neat set of mechanics to switch between and makes the franchise feel incredibly fresh. Here's hoping that Samus' next adventure continues to take the series in new and exciting directions.

"HERE SHE'S BEEN REDUCED TO A WHINY PETULANT CHILD, UNHAPPY WITH HER LOT IN LIFE"



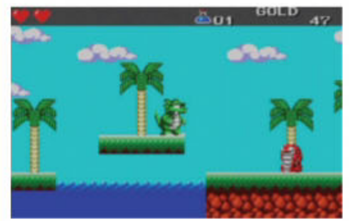




MORE METROID CLONES

Loved Metroid? Try these for size

WONDER BOY: THE DRAGON'S TRAP 1989



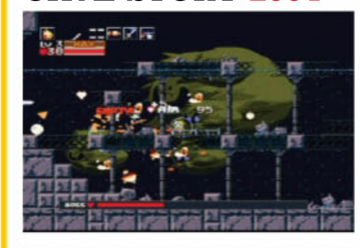
This delightful Master System game sees Wonder Boy getting transformed into a dragon during the game's opening boss fight. As the game progresses he turns into a variety of animals, which in turn slowly opens up the gigantic game world.

CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT 1997



Symphony Of The Night was a huge risk for Konami, as it deviated from both the familiar *Castlevania* template and was a 2D game in a world that was obsessed by 3D. The gamble paid off handsomely, creating the metroidvania sub-genre.

CAVE STORY 2004



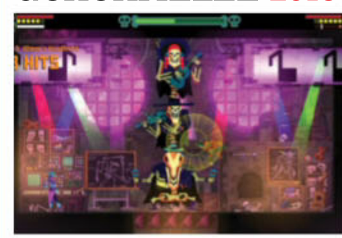
This freeware PC game took five years to create, being crafted by Daisuke "Pixel" Amaya in his spare time. It's a delightful game with tight controls, beautiful pixel art and some very inventive level design. Grab the 3DS version if you can find it.

SHADOW COMPLEX 2009



This stunning effort from Chair utilises the popular 2.5d format to tell the over-the-top adventures of Jason Flemming as he searches for his missing girlfriend. While it maintains the exploration elements of the *Metroid* series, there's a far bigger emphasis on mayhem.

GUACAMELEE 2013

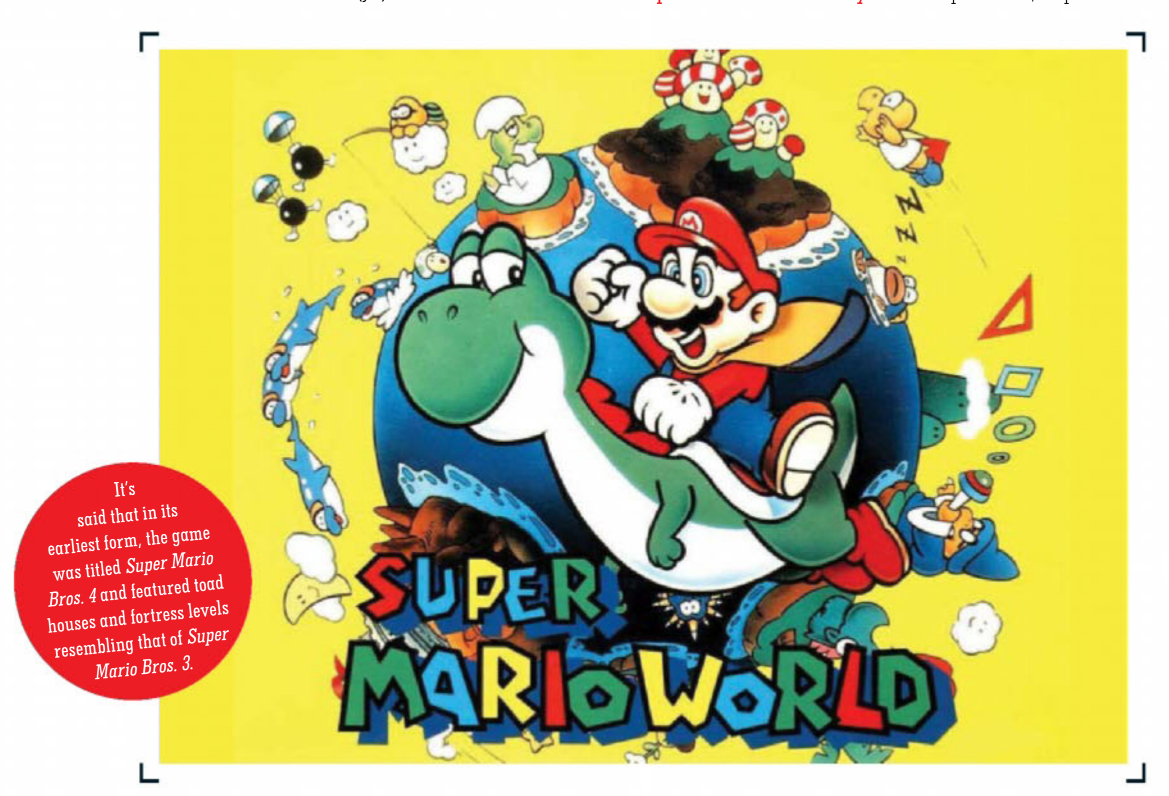


Recently released on Xbox One and PS4, *Guacamelee* is a superb metroidvania that follows the exploits of a humble farmer on a mission to save El Presidente's daughter. Its vibrant visuals and creative Mexican theme sets it apart from similar games.

GAME CHANGERS

SUPER MARIO WORLD

Released: 21 November 1990 (JP) **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Nintendo EAD **System:** Super NES/Super Famicom



It's said that in its earliest form, the game was titled *Super Mario Bros. 4* and featured toad houses and fortress levels resembling that of *Super Mario Bros. 3*.

Having defined a genre on the NES, Nintendo perfected its craft with this Super NES masterpiece

HOW DO YOU improve on perfection? That was the challenge Nintendo faced as it embarked on creating a new *Super Mario* game for the next-generation 16-bit Super Nintendo. Somehow, Shigeru Miyamoto and his team found a way.

If there were ever an actual scientific study into why videogames are fun, *Super Mario World* would be the main case study. It's a masterclass in finely tuned game design. A feat of engineering that, above all else, honed the very core of what makes all *Super Mario* games so special: physics.

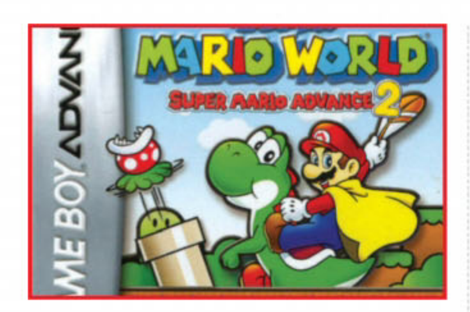
The pre-PlayStation, 2D era of gaming was saturated with side-scrolling platformers no doubt looking to feed off the phenomenal success Nintendo had enjoyed with its mascot throughout the Eighties. While they had all of the face-value features – a cartoony character, a quirky world, and the simple ability to jump, what set *Mario* games apart was a tactile connection between player and plumber that other platformers could rarely replicate.

It's this physics-based game of momentum management that *Super Mario World* nailed. Mario was more controllable than ever before, but still maintained that tangible sense of mass. You were still engaged in what is essentially a battle against Mario's motion, but in *Super Mario World* you felt like you could bounce Mario through levels with the speed and precision of a surgeon with his scalpel.

It's ironic: Sega sold *Sonic* as the super-fast platformer, but while *Sonic's* latter stages stunted his speed by punishing players who tried to rush through its barrage of awkwardly-placed obstacles, *Super Mario World* featured impeccable level design that rewarded fast, flowing play. Those who learned to carry Mario's speed from one platform to the next could make daunting chasms seem a nuisance.

Mario's nimble responsiveness and sharp movement combined with a collection of ingeniously composed sound effects to create an almost

A WORLD OF SUPER MARIO | SUPER MARIO WORLD'S LEGACY STRETCHES FAR BEYOND THAT CURRY-STAINED SNES CART



GRAB THE PORTS

★ Purists will know that the GBA version was made easier, perhaps for the small screen. However, you can get fairly vanilla *SMW* action from the Virtual Console offerings on Wii and Wii U. The latter is glorious in HD.



WATCH THE CARTOON

★ *Super Mario World* spawned a cartoon of its own that spanned across 13 episodes and made several nostalgia-inducing nods to the game with music, locations and characters lifted straight from the SNES classic.



GO FOR A SPEED RECORD

★ *Super Mario World* still has a highly active and still-evolving speed-running community – madly skilled folk who sprint through the game in record times. The ten-minute barrier has been smashed. You think you're good at *Mario*?

inexplicably satisfying tactility with everything Mario does. Then there's that cape. Very little about the Mario universe makes any sense, but the cape item and its gliding manoeuvre introduced admittedly quirky, yet technically impressive aerodynamics. Mario had to sprint to build up speed and then, like the superheroes he's obviously parodying, he would thrust skywards, before nose-diving and using his speed to catch the wind in his cape.

Unlike other *Mario* power-ups, which offered the player an instantly accessible buff, the cape required skill to be used to its fullest. The timing required to keep Mario airborne was tricky, but once mastered, it could allow him to soar through an entire stage, and even access otherwise impossible-to-reach areas.

The jump to 16-bit tech did wonders for *Mario*, and the overworld map was a spectacle of curiosity as you wondered what challenges each area held. Levels looked better than ever with details that made *Super Mario Bros. 3* look archaic. Lava glowed with heat and caves echoed with every sound. Dark levels that forced Mario to activate a light switch before proceeding were ingenious back in 1991.

THE JUMP TO 16-BIT TECH DID WONDERS FOR MARIO, AND THE OVERWORLD MAP WAS A SPECTACLE OF CURIOSITY

KEY FACTS

- It apparently took 16 people around three years to develop the game. Miyamoto was said to have been dissatisfied with the end result due to a lack of character emotion, but has since said it is his favourite *Mario* game.
- The GBA version seemed identical, but it was actually made easier; when hit, a powered-up Mario (flower/cape etc.) would become big Mario. In the original, a hit taken in any form would result in small Mario status.
- Much of the music in the game is actually the same simple melody played at different speeds.

Mario could even jump onto the back of a green dinosaur we'd come to know as Yoshi. Even that was a technical feat back then; Miyamoto is said to have wanted to include Yoshi in earlier *Super Mario* games, but the NES proved incapable of such a feat.

This was Yoshi's debut appearance. Little did we know how much of a star he would become in later years. In *Super Mario World*, Yoshi was little more than a whimsical sidekick that Mario would ride on through stages for his powerful ability to eat any threats in Mario's path. So trivial was Yoshi, that Mario would ditch him remorselessly when he needed an extra kick of altitude.

■■■ Perhaps the best testament to the quality of *Super Mario World* is how well it's stood the test of time. While previous games in the series clearly show their age, *Super Mario World* seems immortal. Its simple, yet charming 2D sprites still look fantastic on a massive 1080p display, its music still has players whistling along in nostalgic glee, and its difficulty curve transitions smoothly from a stroll on a pleasant Sunday morning to a cage fight with a pack of pitbulls. These were the days when videogames actually tried to kick your arse.

It's only deserving, then, that Nintendo has offered no shortage of ways to experience its retro masterpiece over the years. The GBA version, *Super Mario Advance 2: Super Mario World*, brought the game to the portable screen, and both the Wii and Wii U have been graced with a digital version of the game via their respective marketplaces.

Super Mario World continues to place high up in 'best game of all time' lists, and so too should it be high on your list of golden oldies to relive whenever the chance should arise.

GAME CHANGERS

10 THINGS YOU (PROBABLY) DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT SUPER MARIO WORLD

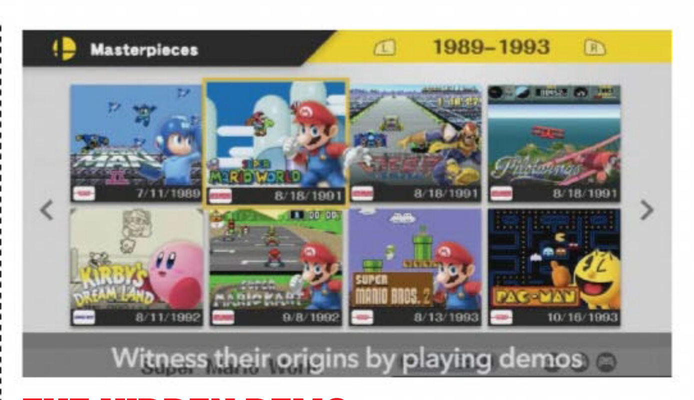
YOU'VE LOVED IT FOR OVER TWO DECADES, BUT DO YOU KNOW ALL THERE IS TO KNOW ABOUT SUPER MARIO WORLD?





A NEW-LOOK LUIGI

■ THE VERSION OF *Super Mario World* that was included in special editions of the *Mario All Stars* compilation appeared identical at first. But, among a number of tiny changes, there was one difference that's so glaring you'll wonder how you never noticed: the *All Stars* version contains a different sprite for Luigi. In the original, Luigi was simply a green Mario, but in *All Stars*, Luigi got his own artwork.



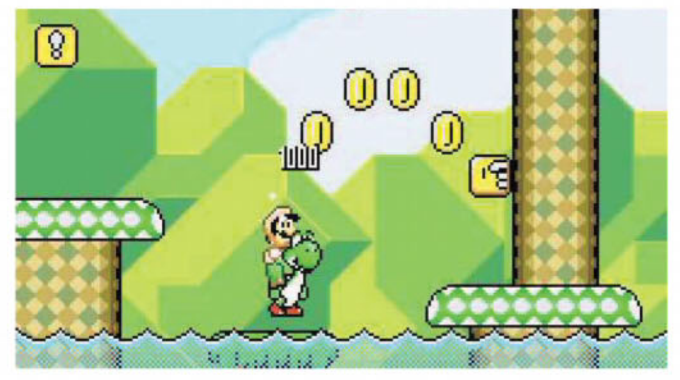
THE HIDDEN DEMO

■ A DEMO VERSION of *Super Mario World* was tucked away in *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, Nintendo's all-star fighter for Wii. The snippet of SNES classic could be unlocked within the game's Masterpieces mode, which offered several bite-size chunks of retro Nintendo games. To unlock the *Super Mario World* demo, you had to Brawl on the Yoshi's Island stage three times. Simple.



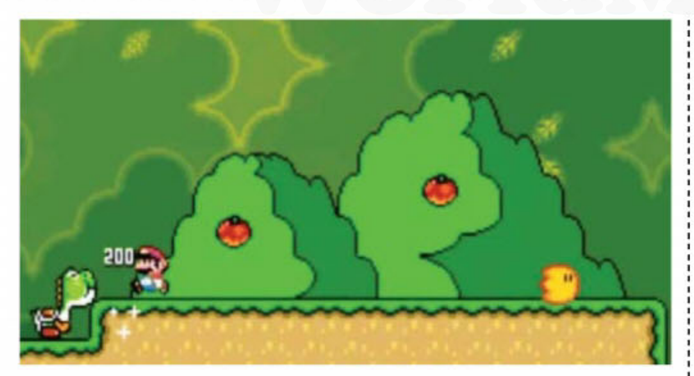
MARIO GETS A VOICE

■ AMONG THE MANY differences in the GBA version of *Super Mario World*, one of the cooler enhancements was the introduction of Mario and Luigi's voices. The previously speechless plumbers were given voices in the handheld remake, performed by Charles Martinet, the now-famed 'Voice of Mario'. The GBA game also got a full intro in which Mario and Luigi showed Peach their mad cape flying skills.



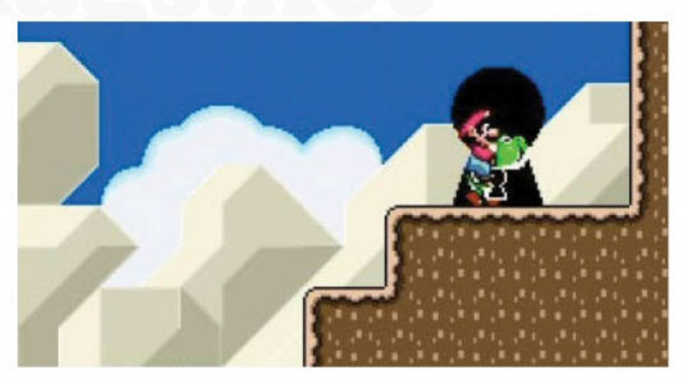
THE BETTER BROTHER?

■ IN THE ORIGINAL *Super Mario World*, both brothers perform identically, despite their different taste in colours. In the GBA port, however, Luigi discovered his now-iconic jump height advantage. While harder to control, if players encountered a tricky jump they could use Luigi, who could bound that bit higher. Purists would argue that this is not how the levels were originally designed to be played.



GLITCHES GALORE

■ *MARIO* FANS HAVE uncovered a large number of quirky tricks and glitches in *Super Mario World*. For example, did you know you can trick the game into letting you hold a shell while climbing a vine? Or use Yoshi to create a glitch reserve item that would offer you a floating-cloud item used to make the final Bowser boss fight easier? If you didn't, search for speed run videos by YouTuber 'dram551'.



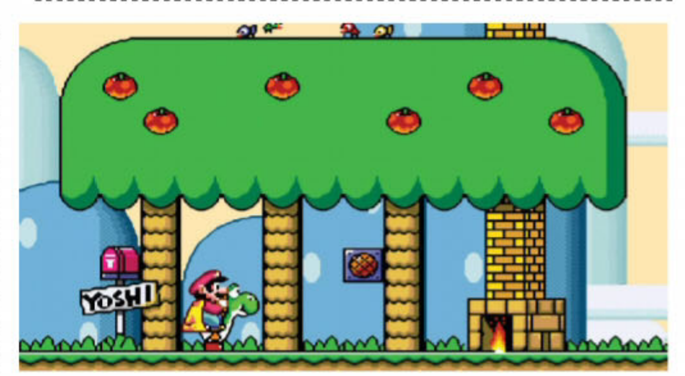
ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

■ THERE ARE A total of 96 exits in the game, but of course, you knew that already, right? What you may not have known is that, going directly via the Star Road secret world, it's possible to reach the end of the game in just 12 stages, and speed runners have perfected this route to crank out completion times under the ten-minute mark without using any tool-assists.



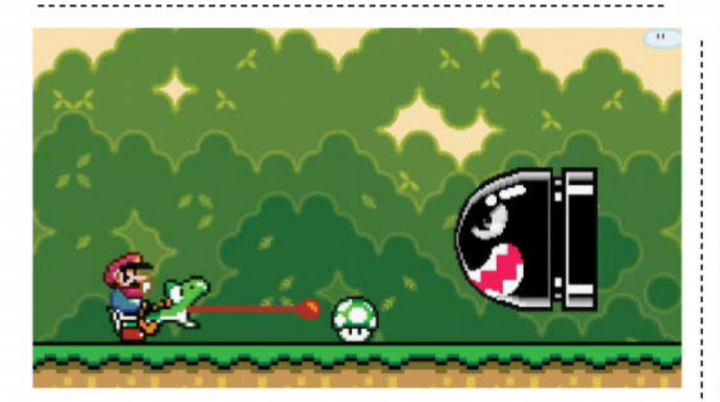
SPECIAL ZONE'S MUSICAL SECRET

■ THE THRILL OF discovering the Special Zone in *Super Mario World* is a fond memory for many long-time fans, but the secret world harboured more surprises. If you left the game to play the Special Zone's overworld music through a couple of loops, you will then be treated to a remix of the original *Super Mario Bros.* theme. It only took 30 seconds of waiting to hear it, so it doesn't take much patience.



THE YOSHI BEAT

■ ONE OF THE lesser appreciated firsts was the bongo-drum remixes of background tunes whenever Mario saddled up on Yoshi. This has, over the years, become a tradition for Yoshi now, with the concept having stood the test of time with appearances in *Super Mario Sunshine* and, more recently, *Super Mario Galaxy 2*. Wherever there's Yoshi, a mystery man with set of bongo drums is sure to follow.



SING-ALONG SONG

■ WE'VE LOVED THE *Super Mario World* soundtrack for years, but as kids we were far too engrossed in trying to beat the game to notice that a large number of the game's background tracks are actually just remixed versions of the same melody. Legendary Nintendo composer Koji Kondo is said to have played the notes out manually, before coming up with several themed alternatives.

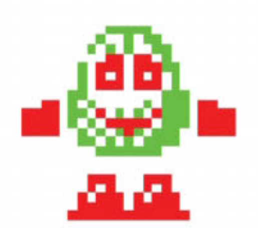


STUCK IN THE THIRD DIMENSION

■ *SUPER MARIO WORLD* may have marked the start of a new console generation, but it would also mark the end of era for the porky plumber. No one would have predicted that it would be the last traditional 2D *Mario* platformer for some 15 years – *New Super Mario Bros. for DS* brought its 2D platforming hiatus to an end in 2006, followed by 2009's *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*.







INTERVIEW

CODING BACK THE YEARS

Best known for co-founding Codemasters, David Darling has had a hand in some of gaming's best-known games, in a career spanning over three decades

Dubbed "whiz-kids" in the Eighties by a national press still coming to terms with a home-computing revolution, the Darling brothers, Richard and David, made their name – and money – producing simple but easily marketable budget games. Having originally sold their ever-growing number of titles direct to the public via mail order, they went on to work for developer Mastertronic before leaving, with the backing and help of dad Jim, to found Codemasters. David became the corporate face of the company, his business acumen helping to steer the publisher from budget to full-price, delivering iconic brands from Dizzy to Micro Machines to Colin McRae Rally in the process. Now heading up iOS game developer Kwalee – as well as having been awarded a CBE – he is ready do it all over again.

Since you were born in 1966, you were still at school when the videogame industry as we know it was in its infancy. What is your earliest gaming memory?

My family lived for a while in Vancouver in Canada and we used to go from the city to Vancouver Island on the ferry. They would have arcade games on board, such as *Pac-Man*, *Galaxian* and *Asteroids*, and my brother Richard and I loved to play them. My dad had also bought us both an Atari VCS and we loved to play games like *Adventure* on it.

Did playing these games make you want to create your own games at the time, or did that come later for you?

I was learning to program because our maths teacher had got a computer, the name of which escapes me, and we had to program it using punched cards. It was laborious but it got me into programming. I'd stay behind at school to program it to use the only keyboard available – it was the only chance I got because there were around 40 children in the day all wanting to have a go on it.

Did it lead to you wanting a computer of your own?

It did, but my dad had a Commodore PET. He was designing contact lenses in a laboratory and the engineers were working out the curvature of the lenses and other things using pencils and paper. My dad thought it would be better to do it on a computer so he bought one. The engineers didn't know how to program it so they asked me and my brother if we could help with the equations. We said we would if we could borrow the PET at the weekends.

> **WE WEREN'T TRYING TO PICK A FIGHT WITH THE BIGGEST GAMES COMPANY IN THE WORLD**

What did you do with the PET?

We were really into *D&D* and we wanted to make a *D&D* game so that's what we used it for. We only programmed in a form of BASIC and it was a text adventure just for us to enjoy. We didn't sell the game.



Although Darlings' Codemasters had its roots in home computers, it made a successful jump to console with *Micro Machines* proving a real favourite.

"ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT"

"In the early days, Codemasters games would carry glowing endorsements. "WE'RE HOOKED" said The Oliver twins about their own game, *Kwik Snax*. David Darling provided many of these self-congratulating quotes: "BRILLIANT!", he wrote for *Mig-29 Soviet Fighter*, while "absolutely brilliant" became a catchphrase. "I believed our games were good and I didn't care telling people", he says. "It may have been unusual but that's never stopped us doing something."

DAVID DARLING, CODEMASTERS CO-FOUNDER"



The young Darling brothers, David and Richard, began coding when they were just 11 and started their first company at age 16.

Did it whet your appetite for games?

We had a friend called Michael Hiebert who had a similar passion for gaming and so we'd program together. Then in 1981, I think, his family bought a Commodore VIC-20 which we used to create versions of *Galaxian*, *Defender* and *Pac-Man*. But then my brother and I got sent back to England to go to school and we lived with our grandparents in Somerset while the rest of the family lived in Vancouver. We bought another VIC-20 but we kept in contact with Michael. We'd have a competition with him over who could make the best games. Over a few months we'd managed to produce quite a few VIC-20 games between us.

What led you to working for Mastertronic?

We'd saved up our pocket money to place an advert in a magazine called *Popular Computing Weekly*, calling ourselves Galactic Software. A few days later we got tons of letters through the post with cheques from people wanting to buy our games. We stayed up all night duplicating them and sending them out, before getting a company involved to do this for us when it all got too much. We started to sell more and more eventually Mastertronic saw one of our adverts and asked if we would write games for them.



Did you enjoy your time at Mastertronic?

It was good fun. They were entrepreneurial and their background was selling video tapes, movies and short films. But they wanted to get into the computer games market. Back then, it was all full price but Mastertronic saw an opportunity for budget games. We made lots of games for them. *Chiller* was a big game [it sold around 280,000 copies] and *BMX Racers* did very well too. I also wrote a car game called *The Last V8*.

Why did you leave Mastertronic?

Richard, my dad and I had set up a development house in a joint venture with Mastertronic called Artificial Intelligence Products, but we wanted to control our own destiny. We sold our shares, exited the firm and used the money to start Codemasters.



Chiller was one of David and Richard Darling's first games. It was produced for Mastertronic and sold for £1.99.

What were Codemasters' early years like?

It was like a family, or at least a little community and it grew fast. There was Philip and Andrew Oliver, or the Oliver Twins, and the Falcus Brothers, Darren and Jason, as well as an artist called Andy Graham and a programmer called Peter Williamson. As things got bigger, we started to run out of room in the Codemasters office and so we had a small village made up of portable cabins in the grounds with different people in each one. It was like a community of developers – not a hippy community but people passionate about computer games.

DEVELOPER COMMENTS

“*BMX Simulator* wasn't the only game with the S-word in its title. There was *Grand Prix Simulator*, *Pro Boxing Simulator*, *Super Tank Simulator*, *Pro Powerboat Simulator* and *Fruit Machine Simulator* to name but a few. Your Sinclair even created an *Advanced Lawnmower Simulator*. "We'd noticed that Mastertronic's best sellers were games based on football or BMXs, where there was a pre-existing popularity. We weren't trying to create real simulators, just games that reflected real life."”

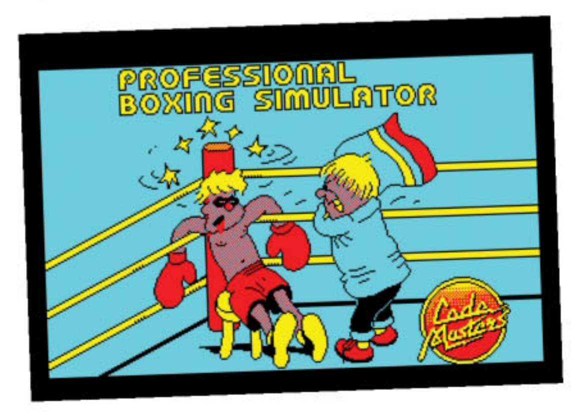
DAVID DARLING, CODEMASTERS CO-FOUNDER

BMX Simulator was the Codies' first game, right?

Yes. Richard had written *BMX Racers* at Mastertronic, which was probably like an endless runner before *Temple Run* – a vertical-scrolling BMX game. So when we started Codemasters, we decided to do another, but this time with a top-down view. We also wanted the game to be more realistic and have laps. We used to do some BMXing ourselves and a big part of the fun was the bent corners, so we put those in too. Then we added two players on the keyboard and two on the joystick. It was actually the first four-player game on the Commodore 64.

That wasn't the only first for Codemasters.

No, it wasn't. When we came up with the J-Cart for the Sega Mega Drive, we were able to add to extra gamepad ports so we were the first to introduce four players to one console and eight with joypad sharing.



You were certainly successful with your games. *Dizzy* was huge. How did that come about?

We were at a computer-game exhibition in London and wanted to find some more programmers to work with us. The Oliver twins stopped by our stand and showed us *Super Robin Hood,* which we agreed to publish. We went on to publish *Ghost Hunters* and we asked them to create *Grand Prix Simulator* for us. A few weeks later, they said they had been working on an egg-shaped character and I wasn't very enthusiastic. I couldn't see what was interesting about it, but we didn't want to stifle their creativity so we said we'd go with it. *Dizzy* was a much bigger success than we were expecting. Every time we published another one, it seemed to build the audience.

And what about *Micro Machines*?

Micro Machines on NES is still my favourite game. It's good fun and you can get a group of people together and laugh your head off with them for hours. It worked great when it was first released in 1991 and *Micro Machines V3* was brilliant on the PlayStation too.

Not all of your innovations were readily accepted by the industry though. When you launched the Game Genie, Nintendo objected and Codemasters ended up in a legal battle. Was it a difficult period?

Well, it wasn't a David and Goliath battle – we weren't trying to pick a fight with the biggest games company in the world. We were having a brainstorming session, thinking of the best Nintendo things we could do, wanting to explore the electronics side. We didn't have a licence to create Nintendo games so we found a way of bypassing Nintendo's lock-out chip and released games that way. We had an idea of placing a switch on the cartridge to add extra lives, weapons and things like that. Then we made the mental leap of saying that if we could do this with our own games, then maybe we could build an interface for other people's games too. It was a game that morphed into an industry.

IT WAS LIKE A COMMUNITY OF DEVELOPERS – NOT A HIPPY COMMUNITY BUT PEOPLE PASSIONATE ABOUT GAMES

And Nintendo hated it.

It did. But we'd tested the Game Genie in schools, patented it and put two years of our lives into it. We went to Taiwan to organise chip and cartridge manufacturing. So when Nintendo said it didn't like it, we had to carry on.

Could Codemasters have gone bust if Nintendo had won and stopped you selling the Game Genie?

I expect so, yes. It would have been a massive setback and a missed opportunity. But the judge said it was legal and that Nintendo couldn't stop it from being sold. I don't think we ever thought we'd lose, though.



■ As was popular in the early Eighties, the Darlings sold their games via mail order, placing an ad – for Galactic Software in this case – in *Popular Computing Weekly.*

Was Codemasters expanding quickly during the Nineties?

We'd got off to a flying start with Codemasters and our games were going to number one in the charts straightaway. I think in the first year we had 27 per cent of the market share according to the Gallup charts. Our biggest challenge in the industry was more about transitioning between platforms; moving from the VIC-20 to the Commodore 16 and Commodore 64, the Dragon 32, the Spectrum, the Atari ST and the Amiga. Then later we had the consoles – 3D with the PlayStation and Dreamcast in particular. There was always a danger that if you supported the wrong format like the Atari Jaguar, that you would risk a lot of development resources.





How did you avoid that?

With a lot of attention to detail. We were so close to the industry and so involved. We weren't only creating games but playing them so we had an intuition and a feeling of the best technology. We'd work out what would be too expensive, what would work and what wouldn't. We had a strong feeling the PlayStation would work in the mid-1990s. It was a brilliant console and we had some great successes like *Colin McRae Rally,* which did well on the PS2 as well.

The 2000s were good for you personally – you won the UK National Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2000 and you were awarded a CBE in 2008…

It was good. It's always good to have achievements.

But why call time on the Codies in 2007?

It was the right time, really. We'd grown the company from the beginning of the industry and it had become the largest developer in Europe and one of only two big ones in the UK – us and Eidos. We'd involved lots of other people in the business and it was time to move on.

What did you do?

I renovated my house, reflected on the changes in the [gaming] industry and explored getting into the design of robots, but then I became excited by the iPhone and saw the potential in people's pockets, [and] the way you could download games and play them without discs, CDs or tapes. I wanted to make games on the iPhone so I set up Kwalee.

And how is Kwalee doing?

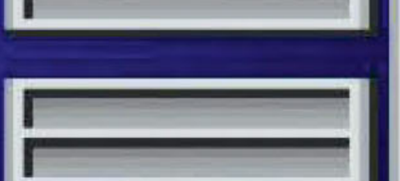
We have 20 people working at Kwalee and we're investing in the company and growing it. We're looking for more artists and programmers and we want to make games with bigger teams. The possibility for growth is bigger now than it was in the Eighties when it was basically a British market. It's global now and a hit can go massive. Gaming is as exciting now as it was when making Spectrum games, and I think it's in my blood because I got involved at such an early age.

"Attack while

NAME BARRIER HP

Cloud 20

Barret 20





BEST BOSS

FINAL FANTASY VII PLAYSTATION **1997**

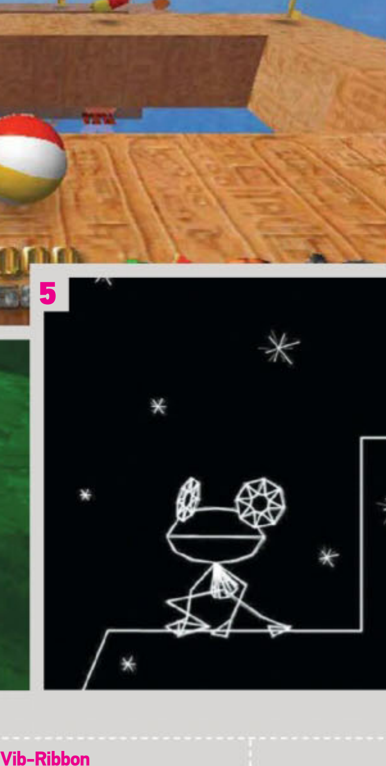
■ The first boss in the first mainstream *Final Fantasy* game to hit the West, the Guard Scorpion proved to be a stumbling block for gamers not used to the way RPGs work. Playing as only protagonist Cloud and the hulking Barrett, your under-levelled party comes up against the mechanical guardian when attempting to sabotage the Mako Industrial Complex that is siphoning off the planet's life force. The battle is actually fairly easy, but due to a translation error and battle-message error, Barrett says 'Attack while it's tail's up!' – complete with errant apostrophe – which will actually lead to a pretty nasty counter-attack. We've heard a fair few stories of young gamers who got stuck at this point; a simple comma would have fixed it. This irritating boss was the straw that broke the camel's back for a few early adopters; players who were already annoyed about not getting the game they thought they were getting from the FMV TV ads promptly opened their PlayStations, put disc one back in the case and took it to their local games shop to trade it in for something else.

ESSENTIALS

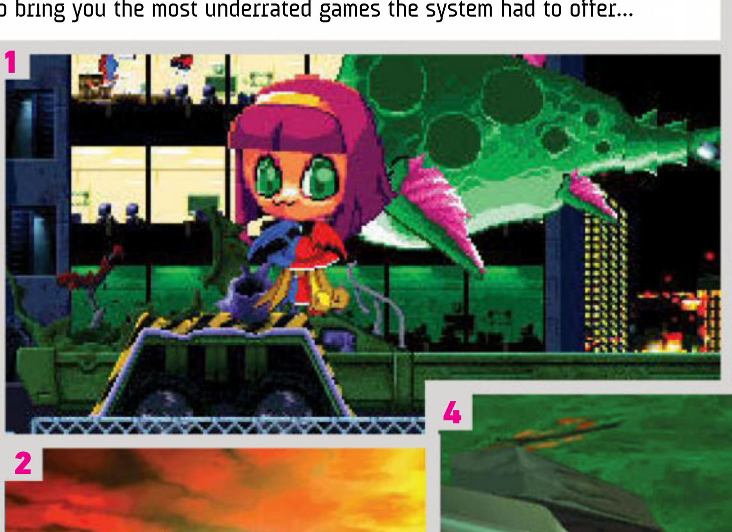
10 UNDERRATED PLAYSTATION GEMS

■ The PlayStation was easily the leader of the fifth generation of consoles – beating the Nintendo 64 and the Sega Saturn when it comes to popularity. As a result, the console attracted a slew of developers, causing in the highest volume of third-party releases any console has ever seen. We've trudged through the best and worst PlayStation games to bring you the most underrated games the system had to offer…

3



1



2

4



5

Silhouette Mirage
Developer: Treasure
Release: June 1998

1 Set in an apocalyptic year 2000, *Silhouette Mirage* was developed by the studio behind *Gunstar Heroes* – owing to the game's action side-scrolling nature. Brimming with Biblical allusions (which had to be changed for the game's Western release, sadly) *Silhouette Mirage* took the action platformer and injected it with a combination of beat-'em-up mechanics and a unique system that meant you had to face either left or right to damage certain enemies. The game really shone in the boss battles, which took all the most insane parts of the game and threw them together in a deliciously difficult encounter.

Power Diggerz
Developer: Taito
Release: July 2001

2 It's amazing that a game exists that actually takes the idea of playing as a digger, and it's even more amazing that it's actually incredibly good. The game starts with the player needing to acquire a digger license through performing a series of tests that familiarise you with the game's mechanics. You're then tasked with taking the (oddly) cute diggers out and about, helping with bizarre tasks like scooping turtles out of pools, destroying houses, whacking moles and loading sand trucks. It all sounds mundane as hell, but there's a pleasant zen that comes with simulating a digger that uses dual analogue stick controls.

Kula World
Developer: Game Design Sweden AB
Release: July 1998

3 Carrying on the theme of bizarre concepts made a reality, we move to *Kula World* – a game that puts you into the consciousness of a Kula beach ball. The majority of early PlayStation adopters would have played the demo version of this game on the infamous Demo One disc (next to *Tekken 3* and *Abe's Oddysee*). Alas, the game didn't do anywhere near as well on the console as its demo-disc stablemates, despite selling out of all printed copies on release. Known as *Roll Away* in North America and *Kula Quest* in Japan, the Swedish game recently launched on PSN – we've been glued to it since.

Jersey Devil
Developer: Behaviour Interactive
Release: December 1997

4 The 3D platformer was all over the PlayStation like a rash – some good, some not so good. Of course, the genre was lead by the likes of *Crash Bandicoot* and *Spyro The Dragon*, but there were still games of note populating the 3D field – *Jersey Devil* being one of them. Playing as the titular Devil, your quest was to scour the city of Jersey, hunting down the nefarious Dr. Knarf who was planning to flood the city with living vegetation, using brainwashed dinosaurs to do his dirty work. With a muzak soundtrack – that's actually a damn sight better than you'd expect – the game was the acceptable side of mediocre.

Vib-Ribbon
Developer: NanaOn-Sha
Release: December 1999

5 In a unique twist, when you booted up *Vib Ribbon*, it loaded itself directly into the PSOne's RAM, meaning you could place any CD in the disc tray and have the music dictate the shape of the levels – cue heady memories of us inserting Eiffel 65's *Blue* and playing along to the cheesy, synthy Euro-pop. *Vib Ribbon* has become something of a classic today, but at the time it was little more than an obscure curio – a novelty game originally made to advertise a Mercedes-Benz A-class car. The game recently saw a re-release on Vita and PS3 – the former practically useless since you can't insert CDs into a Vita.















Jade Cocoon: Story of the Tamamayu
Developer: Genki
Release: December 1998

6 What do you get when you mix the Studio Ghibli artist, the mechanics of *Pokémon*, the control structure of *Resident Evil* and the myriad dark tales surrounding ancient Judaic lore? *Jade Cocoon* is the answer. A peculiar game, *Jade Cocoon* tasked you with using a magical flute to capture weakened monsters and have your terminally cursed wife 'purify' the beasts, allowing you to either spin them into silk to sell for cash, train them up to fight by your side, or merge them together to create a stronger, more powerful beast. It's like a 3D *Pokémon* game, if *Pokémon* was written and designed by Neil Gaiman.

Devil Dice
Developer: Shift
Release: June 1998

7 A unique and obscure puzzle game, *Devil Dice* saw players control a devil that ran around a grid of dice, surprisingly, trying to move them and rotate them to create chains of dice with matching faces. The game on its own isn't too much to write home about, but in multiplayer the game really shone: attempting to counteract the actions of other devils trying to make chains – while simultaneously attempting to set up and defend your own – descended into chaos in about three seconds. Trying to claw your way to victory and be the last devil standing took up a good portion of our 1999.

Pandemonium!
Developer: Toys for Bob
Release: October 1996

8 Released across both the Sega Saturn and the PSOne, *Pandemonium* was a trippy platformer that took the 3D capabilities of the hardware and wrangled them into a 2.5D world, thriving with colour and odd creations. From a giant frog that was accidentally summoned and ate an entire village, to a final boss fight with a literal eye of a storm, *Pandemonium* was a game that really did live up to its name. It gets even better in the sequel – if you finish the game as the jester rather than the acrobatic sorceress, the goofy joker turns the world into the image of his face while he becomes the Sun. Talk about ego.

Vagrant Story
Developer: Squaresoft
Release: February 2000

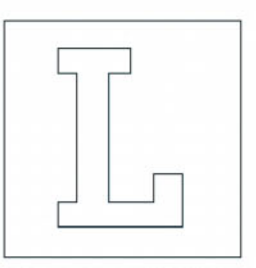
9 The masterminds behind the successful *Final Fantasy Tactics* were responsible for developing *Vagrant Story*. Possibly one of the best action RPGs on the PlayStation, the game was criminally under-marketed, managing to chart only fifth in the month it released in North America, never charting again thereafter (perhaps as it was competing with other Square stablemates *Final Fantasy IX* and *Chrono Cross* at the time). Still, it reviewed well across the board: full scores all round. The game pushed the PlayStation to its limits, and was an early example of how well 3D action RPGs could work.

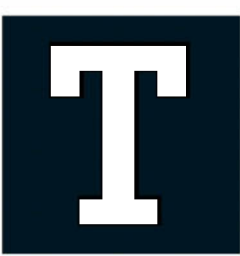
No One Can Stop Mr. Domino!
Developer: Artdink
Release: January 1998

10 This game's title is wildly misleading: a lot of things can stop Mr. Domino, including other dominoes, popcorn, cereal boxes that inexplicably have pictures of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* on them, and (inevitably) himself. Still, we guess *Many Things Can Stop Mr. Domino!* wouldn't have been such a good title, or hinted at the puzzle-based running that the game centres around. It's a really, *really* weird game where you play as a domino laying other dominos around a track, with a view to knocking them all down at the end. Get a high score and the game declares you 'best in the US!', though we don't know how it knew…

THE VAULT







PLAYSTATION TV

MANUFACTURER: **SONY** PRICE: **£84.99**

IN SOME WAYS it's a surprise that it's taken a console manufacturer this long to come up with an idea like PlayStation TV, but it's no surprise that Sony would be the company to break this ground first. If you're not aware, this small four-inch box (apparently 0.85 inches taller than Sackboy, according to Sony), weighing only 3.9 ounces (110 grams) allows you to remote-play your PS4 games on any HD TV in much the same way as you would to a PSVita. Simply connect to the internet and you can stream your PS4 content from where it's typically placed under your main TV and play it in an entirely different room.

Likewise, you can blow up your PSVita content and play a lot of that on a big screen instead, thanks to PlayStation TV using a DualShock 4 controller. It's the kind of room-sharing tech that set-top boxes have been doing for years with television, and now Sony has leapt ahead of the competition to offer it for gaming too. On the down side, the list of compatible games is a little lighter than we might like, but hopefully this will improve with time. Also, the 1080i output isn't ideal in a world that demands 1080p. There's plenty more this tech can do, but it's an interesting start.





READY PLAYER 1 HEAT-CHANGE MUG

This mug is an exclusive to ThinkGeek and a gift we would imagine could warm the heart of any gamer. In its normal state it reads 'Game Over', but add hot liquid and it switches to 'Ready Player 1'.
thinkgeek.com



NATHAN DRAKE UNCHARTED 3 1/6 SCALE FIGURE

It's good to see that we've finally got a quality Nathan Drake action figure around, although this highly detailed, 12-inch re-creation of the *Uncharted* star will deliver a blow to your wallet at $160.
thinkgeek.com



NINTENDO POSTERS

These posters come in a number of variations, all using the original promotional and boxart of some classic Nintendo titles. Games like *Ocarina Of Time*, *Super Mario Kart*, *Donkey Kong* and more are beautifully scaled and printed for your walls.
thinkgeek.com

GAMING CLOTHING



CONDUIT JACKET

This is a pretty spot-on replica of the sleeveless jacket made famous by Delsin Rowe in *InFamous: Second Son*. The studded denim with red and white print on the back is the ultimate gaming punk statement.

insertcoinclothing.com



FOX SHIRT

As you're gearing up for Snake's next outing on PS4 and Xbox One then you may well be considering appropriate attire for the occasion. We suggest you forego the overstated Snake tees and opt for this simpler number.

insertcoinclothing.com



GENKI LEGGINGS

We all know that professor Genki is a madman, but he's got a very amusing face. Halfway between Hello Kitty and the Cheshire Cat, the Genki gives these leggings extra attitude.

insertcoinclothing.com

PORTAL COATS

PRICE: **FROM £99-169**

AS YOU HEAD into the winter months you're going to want something that can offer you some protection. While these coats may say Aperture Science on them – and we wouldn't trust its branding to protect us much – these are actually from Musterbrand and inspired by the *Portal* games rather than made by its shady scientific corporation.

While a *Portal* jacket itself is pretty cool, what we really love is the attention to detail. On the puffer jackets, the inner mesh is revealed by a translucent outer layer, giving the coats a tech feel. What's more, the thumb holes in the sleeves are edged in blue and orange, in honour of the titular portals from the game. All very smart touches to these clean white coats; we're sure GLaDOS herself would wear one if she had a torso to wrap it around. While we can't promise they're suitable for testing purposes, they definitely look the part.

musterbrand.com



MINECRAFT CREEPER FACE BEANIE

PRICE: **£15.99**



***MINECRAFT* HAS A** lot of things about it that have become quite iconic in their own way. Steve the miner, of course, springs to mind as the silent and often-forgotten default hero of the *Minecraft* world. There's the classic pickaxe, around which so much of the game is ultimately built. And then there's the godforsaken Creepers.

These sneaky, hissing, good-for-nothing pricks are always scaring the bejesus out of us. The superbly named monsters will always get the drop on you, managing to find you in even the most remote corners of a map. And then hiss, bang! You're scattered to the wind. These exploding creatures now adorn a nice woolly hat to keep your head warm. Hopefully it isn't filled with dynamite too.

gamer-heaven.net

STREET FIGHTER XMAS JUMPER

PRICE: **£29.99**

EVEN THE MOST highly trained *Street Fighters* need to keep themselves warm in the colder seasons and jumpers like this from Numskull will do very nicely. The festive season always brings with it a swarm of tacky-looking jumpers, yet in recent years we've seen the addition of some much more fun, tongue-in-cheek numbers that geeks like us can get on board with. Now we've got this natty little mix of pine trees and hadoukens.

There are actually a few really nice details in this jumper. The use of the classic festive star between Ken and Ryu is a cool touch. The repetition of KO all over the jumper is pretty good, and we particularly like the yellow health bars that reach across the chest of the knitted top. We look forward to seeing some more characters make a festive top outing sometime in the future.

yellowbulldog.co.uk









PUSH START: THE ART OF VIDEO GAMES


PUBLISHER: **EARBOOKS**



RATHER THAN A collection of concept art, Push Start is a collection of images from the full history of gaming, from *Space Invaders* all the way up to *Infamous Second Son*. What it looks for is the art in games rather than the art that made them. The full-bleed images from some of gaming history's greatest titles are really something to behold and some of the smarter, more creative imagery really stands out. An Andy Warhol homage using the various suits and colourings of *Mega Man*, for instance, is a particular highlight.

This is a serious coffee table read. The print quality is excellent, with thick, high-quality paper and an embossed hardcover that creates a pixelated black-and-white effect for the *Space Invaders* that adorn both the front and rear. As you explore the pages through the eras of 8-bit to 16-bit – and eventually 3D – you can see in one book how far the industry has come, and how the art of gaming has been ever-present.

The ace up the sleeve of *Push Start*, however, and the thing that makes earBooks unique as a publisher is that it comes with a ten-inch vinyl and digital download of remixed music from many of the games included in this collection. Tracks have all been remixed by Big Twice to great effect, and its neon-yellow pressing alongside the beautifully curated collection of images makes for a great package. As innovative ways to display 60 years of gaming history go, this book is one of the best we've ever seen and we highly recommend it.


VERDICT 9/10



THE ART OF TOMB RAIDER

This two-volume package covers all of *Tomb Raider* before the last reboot, with one tackling *Tomb Raider* through to *Angel Of Darkness*, and the other *Legend* through to *Underworld*. It's a shame not to have some of Crystal Dynamics' newer work in here, but that art is available in another book.

forbiddenplanet.com



THE ART OF BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT HARDCOVER

Celebrating 20 years under the name Blizzard and ten years of *World Of Warcraft*, this book is packed with artwork from all the company's major releases. It's a studio with a rich fantasy and sci-fi history from *Diablo* to *Starcraft*, so the art is bound to be awesome.

forbiddenplanet.co.uk



THE ART OF TOTAL WAR

With historical accuracy held in high esteem by The Creative Assembly, the *Total War* series has seen plenty of detailed concepts from classic eras brought to life. From Shogun-era Japan to Napoleonic Europe, this collection of art covers the major releases from the series to date. It's a really amazing collection of concepts.

titanbooks.com



Imagine Publishing Ltd
Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill,
Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586200
Web: www.imagine-publishing.co.uk
www.gamestm.co.uk
www.greatdigitalmags.com

Magazine team

Editor **Jonathan Gordon**
☎ 01202 586213
Editor In Chief **Ryan King**
Staff Writer **Dom Peppiatt**
Production Editor **Rebecca Richards**
Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**
Photographer **James Sheppard**
Publishing Director **Aaron Asadi**
Head of Design **Ross Andrews**

Contributors

Luke Albigés, Adam Barnes, David Crookes, Megan Davis, Jon Denton, Ian Dransfield, Erlingur Einarsson, Philippa Grafton, Stace Harmon, Mike Jackson, Darran Jones, Graeme Mason, Dan Pinchbeck, John Robertson, Chris Schilling, Will Shum, Gavin Thomas, Nick Thorpe, Paul Walker-Emig, Jordan Erica Webber, Josh West

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Advertising

Digital or printed media packs are available on request.
Head of Sales Hang Deretz ☎ 01202 586442
hang.deretz@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Account Manager Anthony Godsell ☎ 01202 586420
anthony.godsell@imagine-publishing.co.uk

International

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Head of International Licensing Cathy Blackman
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586401 licensing@imagine-publishing.co.uk

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Circulation

Head of Circulation Darren Pearce ☎ 01202 586200

Production

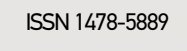
Production Director Jane Hawkins ☎ 01202 586200

Founder

Group Managing Director Damian Butt

Printing & Distribution

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